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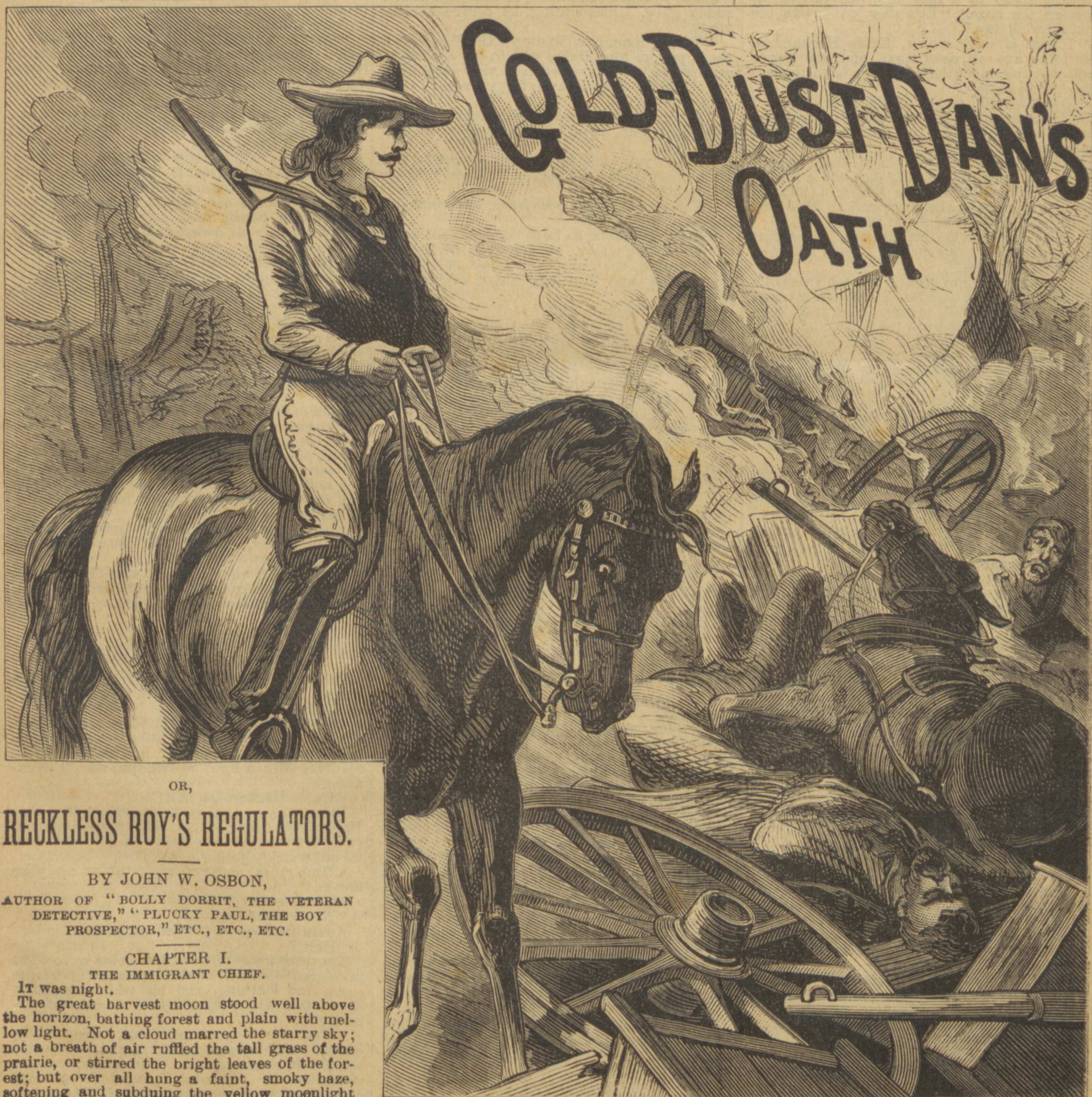
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GOLD-DUST DAN'S OATH

OR,

RECKLESS ROY'S REGULATORS.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,

AUTHOR OF "BOLLY DORRIT, THE VETERAN
DETECTIVE," "PLUCKY PAUL, THE BOY
PROSPECTOR," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE IMMIGRANT CHIEF.

It was night.

The great harvest moon stood well above the horizon, bathing forest and plain with mellow light. Not a cloud marred the starry sky; not a breath of air ruffled the tall grass of the prairie, or stirred the bright leaves of the forest; but over all hung a faint, smoky haze, softening and subduing the yellow moonlight and investing the hour with a subtle influence, weird, mystic.

GOLD-DUST DAN SHUDDERED AS HE GAZED ABOUT HIM. NOWHERE WAS A SIGN OF LIFE VISIBLE. IT WAS A HEART-RENDING SPECTACLE.

Across a level, grassy expanse between the North Fork of the Big Cheyenne and Rattlesnake Creek, wound a train of five wagons, their white canvas tops gleaming like snow under the moonbeams.

A hundred yards or more ahead of this train rode two horsemen, side by side.

One was Jonas Bradlaw, chief of the immigrant party; the other, Hackamore Hank, a guide employed by the immigrants while at Smithville, the last settlement through which the train had passed.

At the moment we introduce them to the reader, the two men were spurring rapidly toward the shadow of a huge, broad-topped, solitary oak on the eastern bank of a small tributary to the Rattlesnake.

This lone tree marked the apex of a slight knoll, which commanded a splendid view of a wide expanse of the surrounding plain.

"What a magnificent place for a camp!" exclaimed Bradlaw, as they drew rein at the summit, his eyes quick to detect the many advantages of the elevation. "Here, with the wagons parked, and everything made snug, we could afford to laugh at an attack of the red devils."

"Mebbe; but that timber line yender must be our camp, Mr. Bradlaw," the guide declared, pointing ahead to a thin blue line just visible through the haze. "Et's ther p'int I've bin aimin' fer all day."

"I wish it were nearer, Guide Hackamore. The folks are all dead tired, and the horses can't keep up much longer. We have made a long march to-day."

"Too long, sir, ter be made often; but ef I hain't greatly mistook et's kerried us acrost ther danger line, an' leaves us but a short day's travel from Rapid City."

"An' now, sir, ef ye'll keep ther wagons movin', I'll ride on ahead, pick out a campground, an' go through the timber a bit. In this kentry et's best allers ter explore these timber islands afore pitchin' tent in 'em."

"Quite right, Guide Hackamore. I see that you leave no point unguarded. Yes, I will keep the wagons moving."

"I've fought Injuns sense I war ten years old, Mr. Bradlaw, an' I kalkilate I know their tricks better'n a Methodist preacher does ther long-meter doxology," returned the guide, and touching spurs to his claybank mare he galloped swiftly toward the distant timber.

Jonas Bradlaw gazed after him admiringly.

"What a splendid horseman!" he murmured, stroking his long beard. "And he is a very prince of bordermen, ever cool, prudent and sagacious, with a frame that apparently never tires. He has certainly served us most faithfully on this perilous trip."

Jonas Bradlaw was an old man, his age exceeding three-score years. He was tall and portly, with dark, piercing eyes and snowy hair and beard, but bore himself with an ease remarkable in one so far beyond the prime of life. He sat his horse like one to the saddle born, was well dressed and well armed.

His bright, black eyes followed the guide for fully a minute, and then he wheeled his horse to ride back to the train.

"Old man, do you want to lose your hair?"

The startling question was uttered in a clear, earnest voice, and came from a point so near at hand that Bradlaw started in surprise and alarm, his hand dropping to the heavy revolver-butt protruding from his holster.

Confronting him, with folded arms, was a tall, well-built youth, clad in buckskin and wearing a black, broad-brimmed slouched hat and high-topped cavalry boots. A stout leather belt encircled his trim waist, and supported an eight-inch bowie and a brace of as fine revolvers as human skill had yet produced.

"Who are you?" Bradlaw demanded, imperiously, his keen eyes fixed searchingly on the face of the youth. "What do you mean?"

"I am Gold-Dust Dan," was the quiet reply, the dark eyes of the youth meeting the questioning gaze calmly and unflinchingly. "And I mean that you and those with you are in terrible danger of losing your scalps."

Bradlaw started. Then back to his mind came the reassuring words of the guide, and he smiled grimly.

"Pooh! boy, you would frighten me!" he cried, contemptuously. "Why, we are out of range of the red-skins and in less than a day's travel of the settlement. Be off! Carry your rot to more gullible markets!"

The youth flushed, then smiled in turn.

"What 'settlement' do you refer to?" he asked.

"Rapid City."

"Rapid City? Why, sir, that is full fifty miles

to the south, and west! Turn which way you may, there is no camp or settlement within a day's travel, and but one within two days—Empire, a trifling camp down on the North Fork!

"This stream here is tributary, not to Elk Creek, as you must suppose, but to the Rattlesnake!"

"In a word, sir, you are traveling, not into the Black Hills, but directly away from them, and are at this moment in the very heart of the Indian country, an easy prey to red-skin or outlaw!"

The earnest face, the positive tones, of the youth, fairly staggered Jonas Bradlaw. He tugged fiercely at his long beard, and eyed his surroundings nervously.

But he was slow to yield his point.

"Guide Hackamore—"

Gold-Dust Dan raised his hand impatiently, saying:

"Pardon the interruption, sir, but this guide, Hackamore Hank, is an infernal scoundrel—a murderous, treacherous decoy! He has deceived you from first to last, with what intent you may surmise when I tell you that he is even now ahead of the train to consult with the most notorious outlaw and renegade who ever cursed the Dakota hills and plains—Red Panther!"

Jonas Bradlaw shuddered, and his face lost its ruddy glow. Dismounting, he confronted the youth.

"Young man, how know ye this?" he asked, the imperious tone giving way to one of deepest earnestness. "I have reposed every confidence in the guide. May Heaven forgive me if I have made a mistake!"

"You certainly have made a mistake," averred Gold-Dust Dan, firmly. "And now, to convince you."

"After you went into camp last night, this Hackamore rode away, and was absent till near midnight?"

"Yes, sir; he asked permission to reconnoiter the country ahead."

"Instead of doing so, he rode on two miles to a timber island, where, by appointment, he met Red Panther, the renegade. I lay concealed in that island and distinctly heard every word spoken."

"Do you recognize this?"

Dan held a small pocket compass so the rays of moonlight fell full upon it.

"That? Why, that is mine!" the immigrant asserted, taking the compass in his hand. "I lost it the first day out from Smithville."

"Hackamore stole it, that he might deceive you in regard to the course," declared Dan. "If you remember, there were two days of dense fog, and during that time, instead of traveling a little south of west, you were going due northwest!"

A groan burst from the lips of Jonas Bradlaw. To his mind at that moment came many things, trifling in themselves, perhaps, but as a whole terribly damaging to the guide, and the truth of the youth's words flashed upon him with the force of absolute conviction.

"Go on—go on!" he cried, hoarsely.

"Willingly, but I must be brief, as we have not a moment to lose," returned Dan. "From Hackamore's talk I learned of the theft of the compass, and its objects. More, that on clear days you had been led out of your course, making long detours to avoid imaginary bands of red-skins."

"It was agreed between them last night that the timber clump toward which Hackamore is now riding, should be the point of attack, the guide pledging himself to lead you straight into an ambush from which there could be no escape. He has impressed you with a sense of security, and has counseled and urged his night march that you men might be tired out and the less able to resist. In a word, he has striven faithfully to make the fulfillment of his wicked compact a complete success."

"The inhuman monster!" grated Bradlaw, the red tide of anger leaping over his face. "I believe you, lad, and ask your pardon for my rudeness a moment ago. But, I had every confidence in that man, in spite of the many unaccountable little things which had happened since I employed him."

"I can hardly understand, though, why the cunning devils should be at such infinite care and pains to entrap the train. It is hardly worth looting."

"Red Panther and the outlaw spoke of that, sir, and it would seem that you have a small steel casket which the renegade is particularly anxious to secure."

Jonas Bradlaw staggered back, and his face instantly grew white.

"The casket!" he muttered, in a thick voice.

"Ah! but they shall never have it! Life itself, first!"

"And now, sir," pursued Gold-Dust Dan, his keen eyes noting Bradlaw's agitation, "I would ask if among the trainmen there is one known as Zack?"

"Zack? Zack? Not to my knowledge, sir," returned Bradlaw, conquering his weakness by a desperate effort. "Why?"

"There is a traitor among the men—an ally of Hackamore. You must watch closely, and at the first sign of treachery lay the fellow by the heels."

"I would suggest, too, that you hurry up the wagons. Park them around this tree, and go into camp. Here you will be on high ground, in the shadow, and with wood and water at hand, and will be better able to withstand an attack."

"And if Hackamore returns?"

"No doubt he will be back shortly, and will insist on your moving on to the timber. Have the fellow and those who side with him seized, bound and gagged. See that they do not escape, for with their knowledge of your forces they would be able to work you great harm."

"By the heavens! I'll hang the scoundrels!" gritted Bradlaw.

"They certainly deserve hanging, sir, but I would counsel milder measures now. They may become valuable as hostages."

"And now, sir, I have a party of friends encamped among the foot-hills twenty miles southwest, experienced rangers and fighters, every one of them; and if you desire their help I'll go secure it."

"I shall be only too glad to accept their services until I am clear of this death-net," earnestly declared Bradlaw.

"And they will be most willing to give you a lift," averred Gold-Dust Dan, and turning away he uttered a low, trilling whistle.

To the intense surprise of Jonas Bradlaw, a magnificent horse, black as jet, rose from the grass a few rods away, and galloped straight to the side of the young ranger.

"Remember!" cried Dan, as he vaulted lightly into the saddle, and then with a parting wave of his hand he galloped swiftly away to the southwest.

Bradlaw's eyes followed him most earnestly for a moment, then turned toward the approaching wagon-train.

But, a rustling in the tall grass just behind him caused him to wheel around, revolver in hand. The grass was waving wildly, and a succession of dull, heavy sounds convinced him that a desperate hand-to-hand struggle was in progress not a rod away.

Dropping the bridle-rein, the immigrant sprang forward. One bound, then came a dull, crunching noise, and a half-naked savage leaped into full view, lunged forward, and fell at his feet—dead!

A single glance, and Bradlaw recoiled with a gasp of horror. The head of the red-skin was cleft from crown to chin!

Then, up from the grass rose Hackamore Hank, his dark eyes aglow with fierce triumph, a dripping tomahawk in his hand.

CHAPTER II.

INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH.

It was with difficulty that Jonas Bradlaw repressed a cry of terror as the guide strode directly toward him.

There came a revulsion of feeling as sudden as startling. Dire anger swept aside his momentary terror and despair, and he leveled the revolver with a hand as firm and steady as adamant.

"Guide Hackamore, halt!"

Never was a man more surprised than was Hackamore Hank when that stern command rung forth. His jaw fell, and his dark face turned a sickly yellow.

"Drop that hatchet and throw up your hands!"

The order was obeyed.

"Now come forward!"

Again Hackamore yielded submission.

"Halt!"

Not three paces separated the two men. The immigrant's dark eyes were agleam with intense scorn and loathing, and his white ominously drawn face was expressive of a relentless determination.

"You cur!—you miserable, treacherous, craven cur!" he enunciated, his low, even voice so cold and cutting, that Hackamore scarcely recognized it. "You have plotted and planned and spread your death-net in vain! At the last moment its fatal meshes have been pointed out,

and now you shall meet with the punishment your perfidy deserves."

Then Hackamore spoke.

"Ye must be gone clean crazy, Mr. Bradlaw," he protested, his voice faltering at first, but gaining in strength as he proceeded. "I've done my part by ye jest as I agreed; an' es fer death-nets, I don't know nothin' about 'em; that's all."

"It is useless to lie, Hackamore. You met Red Panther, the renegade, last night, and you rode ahead to meet him to-night. In that timber island yonder is an ambush, into which you have agreed to lead us. I know all, sir."

The guide uttered a low whistle.

"I'm cleaned stumped—I am fer a gospel fac!" he exclaimed. "Ef thar's an ambush in thet island I don't know et. I went on'y a matter ov three hundred yards when I spied thet 'ar red serpent creepin' thro' ther grass, an' left my hoss an' came back to sp'ile his mischief-makin'. Thet's ther plain truth, Boss Bradlaw, an—"

A gesture of impatience checked him. Jonas Bradlaw wished to hear nothing more; he was thoroughly convinced of the guilt of the guide.

The first wagon in the train was now but a few rods away, and the strange scene between their chief and Hackamore Hank at once attracted the attention of the immigrants. As a result, the wagons were stopped and three of the men hurried to the crest of a knoll.

The foremost of the trio was a fine-looking man of forty years, a son of Jonas Bradlaw. He strode straight to his father's side, revolver in hand, saying:

"What's wrong, father? What's Hockamore been doing?"

"Enough to hang him!" was the grim reply. "Upon him, boys! Disarm, bind and gag the traitorous hound!"

Duke Bradlaw and the two teamsters needed no second bidding. The immigrant chief's word was law—a law they had solemnly bound themselves to obey.

Silently, they closed around the guide, each with a cocked revolver in hand. Hackamore looked from one to another, his eyes glowing with fierce intensity, but he quietly yielded. To resist was to court death, swift, sure, and terrible.

"Guard him, Duke, as you would guard life itself!" adjured the elder Bradlaw, when the trio had finished their task. "Our lives are at stake, for that treacherous hound has sold us out, and the way before us is most desperate now."

"Braddock, and you, Satterlee, fetch the wagons up with all haste, and park them around that tree. Make everything snug to resist an attack!"

With simply an inclination of the head, the two teamsters hurried back to the train, while Duke Bradlaw stood over the prostrate guide.

"What is it, father?" queried the younger man, drawing back a pace, and speaking in a tone inaudible to the captive. "This change—this charge against Hackamore, is so sudden, so wholly unexpected, that I can not understand it."

"Nor do I," was the moody reply. "But, enough has transpired since I quitted the train a half hour ago to warrant the course we have taken," and Jonas Bradlaw rapidly narrated all that had taken place at the knoll.

Duke Bradlaw listened with deepest interest. "You are right, father. There is a cunning plot back of it all," he declared, when the immigrant chief had ended. "And I am equally sure it's the steel casket the devils are after."

"It is the steel casket," affirmed the elder Bradlaw. "And that very fact makes clear the identity of your enemy."

"You suspect it is poor Jack's slayer?"

"Yes, it is Flush Frank, the gambler. Hackamore and Red Panther are but tools in his hands."

Duke remained silent a moment, staring vacantly into the hazy moonlight.

"I hardly know what to think, and even less what to do," he observed, at length. "This complication is so startling—so wholly unexpected, that I am completely dazed. I wish I could have seen that young ranger, Gold-Dust Dan."

"He was off like a rocket the moment he had made the situation clear," returned Jonas Bradlaw.

"But is the situation clear? Is it not possible that this Gold-Dust Dan is himself an outlaw, and plotting our destruction?" Duke protested. "And, were Hackamore an ally of the red-skins, would he dare slay one of their number? No one knew of the presence of the red spy, and he

might have gone scot-free had the guide so elected. No, no, father! I am not convinced that we are adopting the safest course. I can hardly believe Hackamore guilty."

"But the pocket-compass, Duke, and the various suspicious happenings of the past few days—what of them?"

"I confess, father, that it looks dark for Hackamore. Yet it may be that Gold-Dust Dan, not the guide, had a confederate with the train, who stole the compass and delivered it to the ranger. There are—"

A light step directly behind the immigrant caused him to leave the sentence unfinished.

Turning, he stood face to face with a girl—a slender, lissom creature, with streaming red-gold hair, starry blue eyes, small white teeth, and face of almost faultless contour. She was clad in a dark, snug-fitting riding-habit, carried a small rifle, and wore in her sash a brace of exquisitely-mounted revolvers.

"Media! is it you?"

"It is I, papa. Is it a council of war you are holding? What has happened?"

"Much, or little, Media, just as one looks at it," returned Duke Bradlaw. "Go back to the wagons, pet. I will tell you all presently. And do be careful, Media, for we may be in danger."

"Yes, child, you must not venture away from the wagons alone," added the immigrant chief, earnestly. "Wait; I will go with you!"

But, at that moment Braddock came hurrying up. There was a wild gleam in his gray eyes, and his face was colorless.

"Great God, boss!" he ejaculated, in a hoarse undertone, his hands shaking as if palsy-stricken. "We can't camp un'er thet oak—we da'sent!"

"Thar's a hull haydoogin ov red-skins up among ther limbs, ready ter drap down an' slit our throats ther minute we shut an eye!"

This startling announcement fell upon the little group with crushing force.

For a full minute not a word broke the grisly silence. Then Jonas Bradlaw faltered:

"Sure—are you sure, Braddock?"

"Sart'in as I am hyar, boss. On'y by chainece I spied 'em, fer they're well hidden," was the whispered reply. "Don't take my word. Ye've got a night-glass; use it, but don't let ther devils see ye. They don't know they're diskivered, an' our on'y chainece is ter make b'lieve we're goin' inter camp a hafe-mile furdur on, an' then break straight fer ther tim'er yender."

Covertly, Jonas Bradlaw scrutinized the oak, and the glass fully verified Braddock's report.

"They are there," he averred, "and it is evident they expect us to encamp beneath the tree."

"Duke, this trap looks bad for Gold-Dust Dan, and certainly alters my opinion of Hackamore."

"I think, sir, the guide is free of any intent to do us harm."

"Yes, yes; I have been misled. He must be released at once."

"Braddock, do you go back to the train, and quietly pass the word that we are not to encamp on the knoll. Be careful to create no alarm or confusion, or we'll have those cusses down on us in a jiffy. I'll join you in a moment."

The teamster hurried away.

"Now, Duke, you attend to Media," pursued Jonas Bradlaw, drawing his knife. "I'll see to the guide."

Hackamore shook his head vigorously.

"Remove the gag, father; he has something to say," suggested Duke. "Perhaps he doesn't wish to be released."

The captive nodded approval, and the immigrant chief relieved his jaws.

"Ah! thet's better!" grunted Hackamore, moistening his lips. "Leave me bound till ye git me in one ov ther wagons. Thar's sharp eyes in thet tree."

"Better git back ter ther train, Mr. Bradlaw, an' move it up in a hurry. Sing out yer orders jest es ef ye didn't know thar's a red inside ov ten miles. Our hair's in danger, an' nothin' but a bluff game'll save et."

"You heard Braddock?"

"Yes, an' he hit ther proper plan, fu'st pop. We must make ther timber island ahead. Hurry up, now."

Jonas Bradlaw needed just that urging. He was completely dazed.

"You stay hyar, Duke, an' you, gal, jest es ef ye war standin' guard over me," advised Hackamore, as the immigrant chief hastened toward the train. "They'll all be up in a few minutes; an', my word fer et, ther reds won't show ther heads. They'll lay back ter ketch us in camp later on, when they kin take us by s'prise."

The guide's prediction proved correct. Jonas

Bradlaw shouted out his orders to the men as if wholly unconscious of the presence of a lurking foe. The train moved slowly across the knoll, and on toward the timber island, following the course of the creek.

Hackamore was picked up and placed in the second wagon, where he was relieved of his bonds and given his weapons. When a safe distance from the knoll, he quitted the train and secured his horse.

Media Bradlaw, mounted on a magnificent coal-black mare, rode at her grandfather's side just ahead of the wagons.

The old man was nervous and low-spirited.

"I'm afraid we're in for a siege of hard luck, Media," he remarked, with a backward glance at the lone oak, now growing dim in the hazy moonlight. "I don't believe we'll ever get away from those cunning red fiends. They'd never keep so cool and quiet were they not sure of their game."

"I don't like et myself, Mr. Bradlaw," remarked Hackamore, who had silently ridden alongside. "I'll jest drop behind the train an' keep my eyes open. When they see we've not gone inter camp, but are pullin' fer ther timber, they'll likely make a break."

The immigrant nodded acquiescence, and the guide galloped away.

"We can at least leave the wagons and escape with our lives, if we fail to beat them off," Media suggested.

The old man shook his head.

"There's just the trouble, girl," he observed. "Of course, ten well-armed men and a plucky girl like you ought to stand the red devils off; but the trouble is, not one of us but the guide ever had a brush with an Indian, and when the attack is made it'll create a panic, and it'll be every man for himself. With our horses jaded, when it comes to flight, hardly a man will be able to escape."

"With you it will be different, and that's just what I want to talk about. Hurricane is fresh, and can outstrip any horse on the plains. If it comes to the worst, you must ride for life. You will promise me this, Media?"

"If you and papa think it best—yes," the girl replied, a tremor in her voice. "But, I do hope that it may not come to that."

"But it will," declared Jonas. "I believe that not a man of us will escape. Mind you, Media, I am not frightened, or nervous. See—my hand is as steady as a rock. I have not a fear. I speak out of that mysterious knowledge that often comes to men at critical periods, and I speak because I wish to save you, and to balk the devils who are hounding us to death."

"Here is the steel casket. You know its secrets and where to find its counterpart. Take it and secure it to your person, so that it will not be lost."

From an inner pocket of his coat Bradlaw took the casket—a small steel box, oblong in shape, and handed it to Media.

The girl accepted it reluctantly, and fastened it in a pocket of her riding habit.

"There! I feel more at ease!" exclaimed the old man, with a sigh. "I know that you will escape, Media, and it will baffle the hounds. Go—"

A rifle-shot, closely followed by a sharp, agonized screech, interrupted Bradlaw.

"Hark! the battle opens!" he cried, his eyes lighting up with a fierce glow. "Keep close to the train, Media. We may be able to make the timber, as it is now close at hand. Good-by, pet!"

Leaning over, he pressed a kiss on her quivering lips, then wheeled his horse and spurred toward the rear wagons, urging the drivers to greater speed as he passed.

Behind the train, now following it, again halting and facing about with ready rifles, rode Duke Bradlaw and Hackamore Hank.

"Go forward, Duke, and see Media," shouted the immigrant chief, spurring directly between the two men, with weapons drawn. "I will take your place here."

"Yes, go," added Hackamore. "Thar's little ter do hyar yet. But one ov the red beggars hes shown himself. We'll make ther timber all right!"

The guide averted his face to hide the glitter in his evil eyes.

Thus urged, Duke Bradlaw galloped forward.

"See thet gang yender!" cried Hackamore, pointing to a band of a half-score horsemen that suddenly swept into view over the crest of a swell. "They're wuss nor all ther Injuns!"

"The leader rides like Gold-Dust Dan," Bradlaw exclaimed, after a moment, a dark frown crossing his face.

"Gold-Dust Dan!" sneered Hackamore. "Old

man, Gold-Dust Dan is a clean white sport, and a detective ter boot! Thet feller yender who played it on you ter-night is Flush Frank, a gambler an' an outlaw!"

Jonas Bradlaw reeled in his saddle, and a groan broke from his lips.

"Brace up—brace up!" urged the guide, a devilish smile distorting his face; "we're enterin' ther timber now, an' neither Flush Frank nor ther reds'll be apt ter bother ye long!"

Just then Media and her father joined the two, and a moment later all had entered the timber island.

"Ah, I feel safer now," remarked Duke, as they came to a halt.

"You're safe—you bet!" Hackamore returned, in a tone of deep significance, dropping his rifle and drawing his revolvers.

"Hands up—both of you!"

Media uttered a slight scream, while both Duke and his father turned pale.

Before either could utter a word, however, a shrill signal pealed from the lips of the treacherous guide, and forth from their leafy coverts leaped full two-score men, red and white, who hurled themselves upon the doomed train with all the fury of beasts of the jungle!

"Fly, Media!—fly! and may God help you!" shouted Duke Bradlaw, and raising his revolver he sent a ball crashing through the brain of Hackamore Hank!

The next instant, both Jonas Bradlaw and his son fell before a murderous volley from the outlaws.

Sick at heart, almost fainting, the hapless girl touched spur to Hurricane, darted out of the island and away over the plain, the sole survivor of that awful massacre.

CHAPTER III.

OLD CALAMITY, THE MAN OF MISFORTUNE.

"MUD-CATS an' houn' pups! 'Chixt you an' me, Pepper, et do look es ef Ole Calamity was erbout ter receive a through pass fer Eternity's bright an' shinin' shore! Hyar we be, corrilled at last, wi' ev'ry avynoo ov escape shet off, s'rounded by a howlin' pack ov red-skins, an' not a ca'tridge left! B'gosh! we're gone this 'ere time, Pepper—gone!"

Dolefully came the words, and doleful looked the speaker: a little old man, feeble in appearance, sad-eyed and sad-faced. Habiliments of worn and greasy buckskin covered his thin, angular frame, and an old black hat sat well down upon the long, thin wisps of gray hair falling about his shoulders. At his back hung a rifle, in his girdle a pair of big revolvers; but his sole hope was now centered in the weapon clutched tightly in his skeleton hand—a long-bladed bowie.

He was kneeling in the tall prairie grass, beside an ugly-looking old cayuse, as thin and gaunt as its master. The animal lay flat on its side, breathing hard, with its sorry neck stretched to the full, its head on the ground.

"But, b'gosh! 'tain't a new thing fer you an' me, Pepper—misfortune ain't," continued the old man, his cracked voice sinking to a plaintive murmur, a solitary tear stealing down his ghastly face. "Misfortune, b'gosh! hes stuck ter us sence we war weaned an' kicked out knee-high inter ther stream ov life, an' we've bin buffed an' knocked an' cuffed till we've got used ter et, an' expect et, b'gosh! But et's hard, Pepper, 'chixt you an' me—et's hard, b'mighty! when we're grown weary ov this vale ov tears, an' ets trials an' tribbilashuns an' misfortunes an' are jest ready ter lay down an' pass in our chips carm an' peaceful like, b'gosh! ter hev these yer' redimps ov perdition try ter worry us along, raise a calamity an' hurry ther ob-seckies! An' b'gosh! Pepper, when I git ter thinkin' on et, et r'iles all ther good blood in me an' makes me feel es ef 'twa'n't jest time fer us ter give up yit awhile. An', Pepper—"

The murmuring strains ceased abruptly. A fierce sparkle took the place of the sad, wistful look in the dim blue eyes of the old man. There was a visible swelling of his muscles as he crouched closer to the earth and stared fixedly at a point in the grass a few feet distant.

As if conscious of the approach of danger, the cayuse stopped its heavy breathing and lay like an animal bereft of life.

Here and there, the tall grass swayed gently to and fro, though the night was one of dead calm; a faint, barely distinguishable, creeping, rustling sound came from a dozen points around the old borderman—all within a radius of twenty feet.

Old Calamity heard, and the fiery gleam in his sunken orbs grew brighter and fiercer. Too well he knew the meaning of it all. The sav-

ages were moving up—slowly, surely hemming him in!

But, his burning gaze swerved neither right nor left. With the sinuous motion of a serpent, he crept forward and crouched just beyond the head of the cayuse, one hand slightly uplifted, the other firmly clutching the knife.

A moment thus, then the grassy screen before the borderman suddenly parted, disclosing the visage of a red-skin!

The beady black eyes of the warrior emitted a flash of triumph, and he rose upon one knee, hatchet in hand.

Whirr-r-r!

It was the deadly warning of a rattlesnake, and seemed to come from directly beneath the red-skin. With a gasp of alarm, he sprang forward and upward—only to be dropped down by the grasp of an iron hand upon his throat.

The ready knife of the old borderman rose and fell, gleaming in the hazy moonlight like a blade of fire, and the earthly career of the warrior was ended.

Old Calamity bent his head and listened.

That faint, creeping, rustling noise had ceased. Not a sound broke the silence.

A subdued chuckle came from the borderman. Lower he bowed his head, and up from the surrounding grass rose a series of those warning rattles, soft one breath, furious the next, accompanied with a sharp, serpent-like hissing.

A moment thus, then, with a guttural ejaculation here and there, came the hasty tread of retreating feet.

"Fooled 'em ag'in, Pepper, b'gosh!" laughed Old Calamity, gleefully patting the head of the cayuse. "Jest wait a minute, an' we'll throw ther smoky-rinds inter firs!"

Deftly appropriating the cartridge-belt of the dead warrior, the borderman reloaded his weapons, then cautiously made a survey of the surrounding plain.

The red-skins, nine in number, had retreated about seventy yards to the north, where they were grouped, awaiting developments, some mounted, others afoot holding their horses.

"Up, Pepper!"

The old cayuse scrambled nimbly to his feet, and with a wild yell the ranger vaulted into the saddle.

Up to his shoulder came the butt of the Winchester, and thrice in as many breaths its report boomed across the prairie, each bullet finding its billet in man or horse.

Confused by this sudden onslaught, the red-skins broke and scattered in momentary panic, then rallied and with fierce yells charged straight toward their daring foe.

But, Old Calamity had accomplished his purpose. Uttering a hoarse screech of derision and defiance, he turned the head of the cayuse to the southeast and darted away with the speed of a racer.

"Box et lively, Pepper! Hoe 'er down fer Kingdom Come!" he cried, slapping the animal with his old black hat. "Knock ther sod, ole gall! Ther's a conjemmed misfortune hangin' ter our heels, an' we must kick et off ef we're ter die in peace, b'mighty!"

A mile at that mad pace, then the ranger drew rein and looked back.

A shrill, cackling laugh pealed from his lips.

The red-skins had given up the chase and were turning back.

"Ye've given 'em a sample ov style an' quality they don't often see, Pepper," he exclaimed, patting the neck of the cayuse. "Thar ain't a hoss on ther plains 'at kin tech ye fer goin'—thar ain't, by mighty!"

Then at an easy, swinging lope the ranger pushed onward till a swell in the prairie hid his movements from the eyes of the enemy, when he turned due west and urged his steed into a run.

Minute after minute fell behind the tireless cayuse. Gradually, the face of the country changed, becoming broken and irregular, betokening an approach to the foot-hills.

An hour after midnight, the old borderman forded a shallow stream, drew rein and dismounted in the edge of a timber island several acres in extent.

A hasty reconnaissance assured him that he was alone in the wood, and with a grunt expressive of satisfaction he returned to the cayuse, removed its trappings and turned it loose, then stretched himself on the ground and closed his eyes in slumber.

But he was not to sleep undisturbed. An hour before dawn he was awakened by the touch of Pepper's nose against his face.

"What is et, ole watch-dog? Danger, eh?" he exclaimed, springing to his feet and hurriedly replacing the saddle and bridle on the well-

trained brute. "Jest wait, old pard, till I take a look."

Gliding to the edge of the motte, Old Calamity peered out across the open. Approaching from the north, and scarcely a hundred yards distant, were a dozen horsemen, all heavily armed and masked.

"Outlaws, by thunder!" ejaculated the ranger, springing back to the cayuse. "Pepper, git out ov this, lickety-split! Thar's another ov them conjemmed misfortends hangin' over our heads, ready ter drap eny minute! Them dasted hellyuns hev a captive, an' et falls on us ter lay low an' plan a resky!"

Bending low in the saddle to escape the spreading branches, Old Calamity urged his steed swiftly across the island and out into the prairie, keeping the timber between himself and the approaching party.

Three hundred yards from the island, he drew rein, dismounted, and forced the cayuse to lie down in the tall grass.

"Stay hyar till I come or call, Pepper," he muttered, patting the animal affectionately. "I've got a dasted misfortunate calamity on hand, an' when I want ye I'll want ye ba-ad, b'gosh!"

A cautious scrutiny of his surroundings and a few minutes of patient waiting and listening convinced the ranger that the outlaws had not detected his presence. Looking to his weapons, he tightened his belt and crept away through the grass, heading toward a small thicket at the near end of the island.

It required but a few minutes to reach the goal, and with a chuckle of satisfaction Old Calamity squatted in the dense undergrowth to cogitate the next move.

Scarcely had he settled himself in a comfortable position when a faint rustling sound within a yard of him warned him that he was not alone in the thicket, and swift as thought he drew his knife.

Then the foliage before him was abruptly parted, disclosing a massive head and a huge hand clutching a cocked revolver.

"Scat! ye wizened leetle pirit!" uttered the unknown in a hoarse whisper. "Drap thet knife an' throw up ye han's!"

"Mud-cats an' houn' pups!" the old borderman ejaculated, his eyes gleaming wrathfully, his grip on the bowie tightening. "Who are you, I'd like ter know!"

"I'm Big Davy, ther Hunter."

"Wal, Mister Big Davy, ef ye're huntin' a conjemmed misfortune, sail in! I'm Ole Calamity, an' I'm rank p'ison ter smoky-skins an' outlaws, b'gosh!"

A chuckle came from the giant.

CHAPTER IV.

GOLD DUST DAN—THE OATH.

THE hour is midnight; the place, the foot of the southern slope of Owl Butte.

Under a low-growing scrub oak a youth lies sleeping, his head pillowed on his saddle, a pleasant smile hovering over his slightly-parted lips. A stray moonbeam, finding its way downward through the interlacing branches, lights up the face and the form of the sleeper, and discloses in him a splendid specimen of young manhood.

The face is of the Greek type, and is strong and resolute even in repose. The massive shoulders, swelling chest, the perfect trunk, the muscular arms and firm, round limbs, are all those of a trained athlete, and indicate cat-like agility no less than they betray prodigious strength.

His garb is buckskin, with cavalry boots and a light sombrero. A fine repeating rifle rests beside him, and a belt of side-arms encircles his trim waist.

Out in the moonlight, leisurely cropping the prairie grass, is a magnificent black horse—as fine a specimen of the equine as its master is of man.

Suddenly it lifts its head, pricks up its ears and looks away to the south.

There, on the crest of a swell, in outline against the hazy sky, is a horse and rider, and the rider is a woman!

"Ho! ho! ho! You wretch! you scarlet devil! And thus ye add another to the long list of foul, black crimes staining your life! But strike, Red Panther—strike! Rob! maim! murder! There is none to prevent, for your arm is strong and your minions many and merciless! Crush, as ye crushed poor Ruth! If you spare a life, rob it of peace and leave the soul dead!"

"Oh, ye dastard! ye fiend infernal! you have sealed your own fate—written in blood your own doom! For Roving Ruth hath sworn to slay ye, and fall by her hand ye must and shall!"

"Ha! ha! ha! ho! ho! ho! Revenge, oh Lord! and then the grave!"

An uncanny screech followed that strange, wild outburst, rising high above the warring sounds at that moment making night hideous; a screech so intensely fierce and vindictive that it might well have chilled the stoutest heart, and the more terrible in that it came from the lips of a beautiful woman!

Beautiful—yes! though garbed in buckskin and armed like a desperado—though the lithe, exquisitely-molded form hinted the tigress in its graceful sinuous swaying. The dark Hebrew face was one, once seen, never to be forgotten; and, for all the hard lines imposed by care and grief, was yet weirdly beautiful, with its warm tints, lustrous hazel eyes and pearly teeth.

But the crowning glory of the strange creature—the distinguishing mark by which she might have been singled out from among ten thousand—was her hair. Thick, soft, luxuriant, it fell almost to her feet in rippling tresses of silvery white!

Whence she came or who she was, no one, perhaps, in all that wild region knew. She had frequently been seen sweeping over the plains or threading the mazes of the hills, now here, now there, but always at night; and on two or three occasions, mounted on her noble, milk-white horse and leading a pack-mule, she had ridden boldly into some of the more isolated camps to purchase supplies, in each instance making payment therefor in virgin gold.

"She's got a pay-streak somewhere back in the hills," the miners could not help thinking when this latter fact had been made known, and some of the more unscrupulous had attempted to trail her to her hiding-place, but in vain.

As Roving Ruth she had come to be known, and the superstitious held her in awe as one possessed of powers more than mortal, while others believed her the victim of some dire calamity which had wrecked her mind and driven her forth an aimless wanderer.

That this latter view was not far from correct, the words we have heard fall from her lips attest.

At the moment we introduce this beautiful mystery to the reader, she was seated upon the bare back of her great white stallion, just within the northern borders of the motte wherein the ill-fated Bradlaw train had encountered Red Panther's desperate clan, and as that wild cry pealed from her lips she urged the horse toward the scene of the conflict then raging.

Her dark eyes burned and glittered with a savage light, and her face, now stern and cruel in its look of desperate resolution, wore the waxen pallor of death.

Straight upon the horde of outlaws she charged, the sharp notes of the revolver in each hand adding to the din and confusion, each bullet speeding true to its billet, her deadly aim no less than her deathly appearance carrying fear and terror to the hearts of the plundering wretches.

"Curse the she-devil!" uttered a hoarse voice, as a tall man in scarlet leaped forward. "Seize her, boys! A thousand dollars to the man who takes her dead or alive!"

A burst of mocking, elfish laughter, a parting shot at the nearest of her foes, a repetition of that unearthly cry which had signaled her furious onslaught, and the beautiful mystery wheeled her horse and darted away with the speed of the wind, followed by shot after shot.

Out of the motte and straight across the plain coursed the gallant stallion, the lithe form of Roving Ruth swaying and bending with supple grace, her long white hair streaming like a banner in the breeze.

Far out in the prairie a brawny warrior started up, lariat in hand, a look of triumph on his painted face—a look that quickly changed to terror and dismay as the great white horse charged straight upon him with scream after scream of furious rage. Frozen with fear, the wretch dropped the lariat and turned to flee. As well might he have attempted to elude a thunderbolt. Down upon him thundered horse and rider, crushing him to the earth—mangled, lifeless!

Then on toward a dark, cone-shaped mass looming through the hazy moonlight to the northwest swept the noble animal, straight as a bee flies.

Away from the scenes of strife, alone in the great wild, the mood of his rider changes. The cold, hard lines disappear from her face, leaving naught but womanly beauty, tinged with sadness and anxiety; the dark eyes lose their vicious glow, and beam with a soft, lustrous light.

A shrill whinny from the black horse aroused

the sleeper at the foot of Owl Butte, and he sprang to his feet, rifle in hand.

"What is it, good Prince?" he exclaimed, bounding lightly to the side of the animal, his dark eyes sweeping the plain. "Aha! a horse and rider—the horse white, the rider a woman! Hornets! I believe it's the Black Hills' mystery, Roving Ruth!"

A moment's scrutiny served to strengthen this belief in the keen-eyed young ranger.

"By Heaven! she has sighted us, Prince, and is riding this way," he continued, after a long look at the weird rider. "Come! we will meet her, even though rumor has it that Roving Ruth is ever the bearer of bad tidings."

Hastily putting the trappings on his horse, the ranger mounted and spurred out into the plain, eager to meet the beautiful mystery face to face.

A half-mile from the foot of the butte he drew rein and respectfully lifted his hat as the woman came to a halt a rod away.

For a moment the two eyed each other in silence. The youth was the first to speak.

"Pardon me, lady, if the question seems impertinent, but are you not Roving Ruth?" he asked.

"I am that unfortunate being," was the low-voiced reply. "And you?"

"I am Daniel Deerfoot, better known in the camps and on the trails as Gold-Dust Dan."

"Gold-Dust Dan!" The woman started slightly as she repeated the name, and regarded the youth with strange intentness. "I have heard that name, but never a word of evil of it!"

The ranger bowed.

"I am glad to hear that," he remarked, with a slight smile. "But you convince me that you have encountered only my friends."

"No, no!" cried the woman, shaking her head. "I take the report of your enemies—the worst enemies an honest man could have in this lawless region—Red Panther's clan!"

"They have been forewarned of your coming, and every cut-throat in the band has orders to kill you on sight!"

"Aha! you interest me, lady—"

"Call me Ruth," interposed the strange creature, urging her horse closer to that of the ranger.

"As you will, Ruth," Dan returned, again inclining his head. "May I ask when you heard this?"

"Two nights since Red Panther announced your coming and put a price on your head. And I warn you, Gold-Dust Dan, to be on your guard! The outlaw chief is powerful, and has spies in every quarter."

"Thank you, Ruth. I will try to spoil his little game against me."

"You will need to be wary to do that," Roving Ruth averred, earnestly. "Let me tell you, Gold-Dust Dan, that even now you may be under the eye of some of his minions. Less than an hour ago the wretches fell upon and destroyed a wagon train five or six miles to the south, and as it is their custom to break up into parties of twos and threes the better to escape pursuit after the perpetration of such an atrocity, you are likely to run afoul of some of the band at any moment."

"Again I thank you, Ruth," the ranger declared. "Your warning shall not pass unheeded. But you—are you not in danger?"

The woman laughed, and her dark eyes kindled.

"Have no fears for me, Gold-Dust Dan!" she cried. "And now—farewell!"

Like an arrow from the bow the great white horse darted away, defying pursuit, urged simply by the tapping of a hand.

Gold-Dust Dan gazed after her a moment, then touched spur to Prince, and at a swift, tireless lope rode toward the south, his keen eyes sweeping the prairie ahead, his brow knitted in thought.

"And so Roving Ruth is no camp-fire myth," he mused. "Nor is she the creature rumor paints her—a fierce destroying angel, as wild and untamed as the veriest savage. No, no! she is one who has suffered, for her face is sad, her eyes mournful. If chance—"

"Aha!"

Back upon his haunches went the horse, under the firm hand of his rider, and Gold-Dust Dan looked long and steadily toward the southwest, where a dull red glow rose against the hazy horizon.

"The devils have finished their work and fired the train," he muttered, grimly. "Come, Prince—that is the point for us, for there we shall strike Red Panther's trail."

Straight toward the ominous light spurred the ranger, his face set and resolute, every sense

alert, for he knew that deadly peril lay before him.

In due course the fatal timber island was reached, and riding into the shadows of the northern border a thorough search through the motte convinced him that the last of the outlaw cohort had departed, and he rode on to the scene of the tragedy—now marked by only a faint glow from the smoldering embers of the wagons.

That the struggle had been most desperate, was attested by the grim evidences strewn on every hand. Ambushed and beset by a murderous horde outnumbering them three to one, the immigrants had rallied and fought with a fierceness born of hopeless despair, going down with weapons in hand and no cry for quarter. Men and horses lay dead on every side—the men stripped of weapons and valuables, the horses of their trappings.

Gold-Dust Dan shuddered as he gazed about him. Nowhere was a sign of life visible. It was a heart-rending spectacle.

Leaking from his horse, from form to form he slowly made his way, scanning each cold, distorted face.

"The head-devil has again escaped, though his men suffered most severely," the young ranger muttered, as he drew near the end of the ghastly line. "May the fates preserve him for the hangman's noose!"

"Amen!"

In a low, deep voice came that one word. Gold-Dust Dan started, and his hands sought the revolvers in his belt.

"Save your lead, boy," continued that husky voice, and a gray-haired man at the end of the line slowly raised himself upon his elbow. "Were I an outlaw, I would be powerless to harm you. I have my death-wound."

"This way—quick, for I infer you are an enemy to Red Panther, and as such I would speak with you."

In a moment the young ranger was bending over the speaker. That the stricken man had but a few minutes to live was apparent at a glance. His life-blood was ebbing away through a number of gaping wounds; the gray pallor of death was upon his face, and his eyes were fast glazing.

"Your name?" gasped the stricken immigrant.

"Daniel Deerfoot known as Gold-Dust Dan!"

"Mine is Jonas Bradlow. I was the head of the ill-fated party destroyed here by Red Panther; and, Daniel Deerfoot, I leave you a mission to perform—a mission of revenge and restitution, attended with a golden reward! Listen!"

Lower sunk the voice of the dying man, and as the words came hurriedly from his livid lips, Gold-Dust Dan listened with deepest interest, his dark eyes kindling with a wrathful glow.

And truly it was a story to excite the warmest sympathies of the young knight-errant of the plains—a story of ambition thwarted, treachery and death!

Only too soon the low, husky strains ceased; the gray head sunk back, and an ominous rattle came from the bearded throat. Too soon, and yet Jonas Bradlow had lived to make clear the situation—to enlist in the cause of the hapless Media a champion, gallant and true!

The smoldering embers flared up, and as the light flickered across the face of the old immigrant, he suddenly lifted his head.

"Swear it, boy!—swear you'll not desert poor Media—that you'll stand between her and her foes!" he cried, raising his appealing eyes to the stern visage of the youth. "Swear it, upon your honor!"

"I swear it, sir, upon my honor!" was the deep-toned response. "Media Bradlaw's cause shall be my cause until she is safe and her wrongs are righted!"

A gasp, a faint sigh of relief, and the soul of the immigrant winged its flight.

Sternly, sadly, Gold-Dust Dan gazed down into the lifeless face.

"The dastards!" he muttered, turning away. "Let them have a care, for as sure as there is a God in heaven, Dan Deerfoot will strike them down!"

Out of the darkness came a lurid flash, followed by a sharp report. With a single agonized groan, the young ranger reeled and fell, the victim of a lurking assassin!

CHAPTER V.

RECKLESS ROY'S PRIZE.

"HEAVEN help me! I know not which way to turn!"

The words burst from Media Bradlaw's lips, and she drew rein, a look of terror in her blue eyes.

Less than a hundred yards to the rear rode three members of Red Panther's band in hot pursuit, while but a rifle-shot ahead, spread out in the form of a huge crescent and sweeping toward her with the speed of the wind, were a full score horsemen.

That this latter party were also outlaws bent on her capture, the girl had not a doubt, and the very hopelessness of her situation roused her to decisive action.

"They are foes—every scoundrel of them!" she cried, a fierce strain creeping into her sweet voice. "Yield I will not! Death before capture!"

Her blue eyes aglow, her face marble-like in its pallor, Media dismounted and leveled her light rifle across the saddle.

An instant, then over the moonlight plain rung the sharp report, and the horse of her foremost foe went down, catching his rider and pinioning him underneath with a broken leg.

A ringing cheer from the distant horsemen greeted the shot, but onward coursed the remaining pursuers, heedless of their comrade's fate.

Again and again the Winchester cracked, and a horse galloped away riderless, while the last of the trio flung himself from the saddle to seek the shelter of the tall prairie grass.

It was a vain attempt, for even as his feet touched the earth a bullet entered his shoulder and he went down crippled for life.

Then upon the squad of approaching horsemen Media turned her rifle, her face gleaming white and cold in the moonlight.

"Halt!"

As that single word of command rung from the lips of their leader, every man drew rein, while the speaker spurred forward with a white kerchief held aloft.

On and on, till scarce twenty paces lay between him and the heroic girl. Then:

"Hold! Explain your errand!"

Clearly Media uttered the words, and her rifle covered the chief of the night-riders.

"I came as a friend, lady—not as a foe!" was the quick response, as the horseman abruptly halted.

"Outlaws though we are, we war not on women, and are here to offer you safe convoy beyond the reach of Red Panther."

"Indeed?" and Media's red lips curled scornfully. "Between you and Red Panther, Sir Robber, I can make no choice, for your treachery is known to me."

"For it was you, Gold-Dust Dan, who under the guise of friendship, attempted to lure the train into a deadly ambush, to cheat Red Panther of his prey."

"To your offer I say *no*! Go back to your men and tell them brute force must take the place of treacherous cunning—that while life remains I will not yield!"

The youth bowed his head, and his face grew white and stern. Media Bradlaw's words had scored him deeply.

"Listen, lady!" he cried, his eyes flashing, his voice sharp and imperious. "Let the full truth be known, for your plight is most desperate, and you should not decide blindly."

"I am Reckless Roy, road-agent and outlaw, if it please you, and the men at my back are sworn to follow me through thick and thin. But never a cold-blooded murder can be laid at their door or mine, nor have we pillaged the poor, the weak or the helpless. Our prey has been the lawless, our mission one of reprisal against the red-handed outlaws infesting the hill and the plains."

"For weeks we have been planning the extermination of Red Panther and his renegades, and while hounding him I learned of his plot with Hackamore Hank, and at the earliest moment possible warned Jonas Bradley of his peril."

"Under the assumed name of Gold-Dust Dan, and with a recommendation that he encamp within the cunning ambush you had arranged," uttered Media, coldly.

"Under an assumed name—yes!" was the swift retort. "To have revealed myself to Jonas Bradlaw as Reckless Roy would have put at naught my efforts in his behalf. Of the ambush you hint at, I know nothing. Indeed, when I rode away to my band I left between Red Panther and the train, to give warning of the outlaw's approach, one Hawk-Eyes, a faithful scout."

"As luck would have it, I encountered my followers a few miles to the south. They had learned of Red Panther's design, and had broken camp to attack and thwart him. We are too late to save the train, but we offer you escort to a place of safety."

"And again I decline that offer, Reckless

Roy," cried Media, sternly. "Now go, and withdraw your men, or I shall open fire!"

The young outlaw bowed gravely, wheeled his horse and slowly rode back to his band.

"Fall in, boys! Ride to the west, and leave the way open for the lady to pass," he ordered.

"Put on your masks and stand ready to give Red Panther a tussle, for, by heavens! if he attempts her capture he must first rout us!"

Silently the men obeyed, moving aside in a solid body. Then as they halted and faced about, a shout of horror burst from their lips—a shout followed by a piercing scream from Media Bradlaw!

For the girl was struggling in the grasp of a brawny Sioux warrior, while from their coverts in the high grass to the east rose nearly a score more, to pour a volley into the ranks of the outlaw band.

"Revolvers, boys, and at them!" thundered Reckless Roy, striking spurs to his horse, and plunging forward. "Leave the girl to me!"

Like an avalanche the desperate band swept forward, fearlessly, every man with a cocked "six" in each hand, a wild battle-yell ringing from his lips.

Before that terrific charge the Indians broke and fled, dropping out of sight in the grass to escape the deadly revolvers, intent only on reaching their horses in safety.

For they had gained their end—the capture of Media Bradlaw!

Three hundred yards to the east, and gradually edging off to the north, mounted on Hurricane, with the girl in his arms, rode the leader of the assault, his painted face aflame with savage triumph.

But that triumph was short-lived. A warning yell from one of the fleeing braves caused him to glance back, and his expression instantly changed to one of rage, not unmixed with chagrin.

Less than a hundred yards distant, sweeping over the plain like an avenging centaur, came the chief of those dread riders in buckskin, his horse gaining on the doubly-burdened animal of the savage at every bound.

That escape by flight was out of the possibilities, that one glance assured the red-skin. Uttering a furious yell, he wheeled the horse and confronted his foe.

"Back!" he shouted, his face distorted with fury, as he whipped out his knife and poised it above the heart of the girl. "Back! or Long Wolf kill the pale-face squaw."

Back upon its haunches went the mighty horse bestrode by Reckless Roy, for the young outlaw knew the warrior's words were no idle threat.

"Back! back!" roared the savage. "Ho! would he—"

The sharp crack of a revolver, a scream of pain, and the glittering blade fell to the ground. His arm shattered by that adroit snap-shot, Long Wolf wheeled his horse and again sought safety in flight.

After plunged Reckless Roy, urging his horse to a magnificent burst of speed, and the chase was ended. For, as he ran alongside, the outlaw again fired, and his bullet found the brain of the relentless savage.

In time, too, to save Media Bradlaw from a heavy fall as the arm of her captor relaxed, was the dashing rider, and as he deftly caught her about the waist and swung her to a seat before him, the death-stricken red-skin toppled from Hurricane's back.

Thus eased of his double-burden, the sagacious animal stopped, and at her request Media was transferred to her own saddle.

"You are a brave man, and it is a pity you are an outlaw," the girl observed, quietly, her dark blue eyes scanning all that was visible of the masked face of her rescuer. "You have rendered me a great service, and I thank you."

"You're welcome to the little I've done, miss," Reckless Roy returned, a grimly, earnest strain in his voice.

"Mebbe ye won't thank me so much when ye learn what I've determined to do!"

"And what is that?"

"Hold ye captive till ye're safe out of this neck-o' the woods! I've earned the right to look after you, and I'm goin to do it!"

"I'm powerless to prevent you taking the matter in your own hands," Media observed, "But I should much prefer to go alone."

"Out of question, miss. Naturally, ye don't like to trust yourself in the hands of an outlaw, and in that ye're right. But, I assure you no harm shall come to you, and you may keep your horse and your weapons, and be at perfect liberty, with the sole restriction that ye make no attempt to escape."

Media gravely inclined her head, saying:

"I am forced to submit. I accept your terms."

Silently the two rode back to the point where the band had gathered to await their return.

"Cap, shall I take a dozen of the boys and run over to that timber island?" asked one of the riders, spurring alongside of Reckless Roy. "We might be able to give the train a lift, yet."

"It is too late, Idaho," replied the chief. "Look yonder."

He pointed to the timber island.

Twenty-five or thirty horsemen, red and white, had emerged upon the plain, and were charging straight toward the outlaw band, while back among the trees a bright red glow was springing up.

Media choked back a convulsive sob. She realized the grim truth.

"You are right, Cap, an' I reckon it's the lady they want now," uttered Idaho, in a hushed voice. "Shall we make a stand here, or back for the hills?"

"Break for cover, and give the devils a lesson!" Reckless Roy replied, his dark eyes flashing. "Our horses are good yet for a ten-mile dash, and I know the spot we want—a bit of timber just this side the foot-hills. We'll stand there, and if Red Panther wants war, he shall have it to his heart's content."

"Form the men, Idaho, and follow me."

And with Media Bradlaw at his side, the young outlaw wheeled his horse to the southwest. The band fell in, two abreast, and with Idaho alone in the rear, the dashing cavalcade set forward at a swinging lope.

A yell from Red Panther's men greeted the move, and then the chase began in earnest.

From time to time Reckless Roy glanced back, and when five miles had been covered, a grim smile curled his lips.

"They hold their own—no more!" he muttered, the shade of anxiety mantling his face disappearing.

An hour before dawn, a brief halt was called, and Idaho, with seven picked men, fell back and aligned themselves along the crest of a swell, to hold the pursuers in check.

With his rear thus guarded, Reckless Roy pushed on with two others of his command, soon fording a small stream and entering a timber island—the point of vantage sought.

Here the party stopped and dismounted, and made preparations to go into camp. Guards were set, the horses picketed and hopped, and a wicky-up was erected in a secluded nook for the use of Media.

One of the men had picked up the girl's rifle at the scene of her encounter with Lone Wolf, and now Reckless Roy returned the weapon to her, with words of praise and encouragement.

"Get what rest ye can," he advised, as he left her at the entrance of the wicky-up. "You'll find blankets inside, and may sleep with perfect safety. Two men will guard against an approach from any one who may slip through our outer line. And now, good-night."

"I thank you, Reckless Roy. You are not only brave, but generous. Good-night!"

And with tear-dimmed eyes and trembling lips, Media Bradlaw entered the wicky-up.

The young outlaw strode away with bowed head and moody face.

"What a beautiful creature she is!" he murmured, with an involuntary sigh. "Give her over to Red Panther's tender mercies?—never! I've cheated him of his prize, and while life lasts I'll never yield it!"

The crash of firearms out on the plain drew his thoughts into another channel. Idaho and his men had fired on the enemy, and a moment later came dashing into camp.

"Cap, I reckon we're in for a mighty tough rustle," cried the leader of the rear guard, as he sprung from the saddle. "Two gangs of red bucks are coming up to reinforce the band out there, while old Red Panther and a dozen of his renegades are three miles out riding like mad."

"How many in all, Idaho?"

"Close onto a hundred, I reckon, Cap."

"Five to one. Not such big odds, boys, with the timber for shelter and wood and water at hand. We've been in tighter places and pulled through."

"But get yourselves ready. Daylight is near at hand, and they'll very likely attack us before sunrise."

Then, as the men hurried away with their horses, Reckless Roy walked out and made a round of the sentries, after which he posted himself at the northern edge of the motte to watch the maneuvers of the enemy.

The pursuing party, now reinforced by the two bands of reds Idaho had reported, were

drawn up in a long line just out of range, and were evidently awaiting the arrival of their chief, the notorious Red Panther.

Far out on each flank, at points commanding an unobstructed view of the plain south of the timber island, vedettes had been posted, to give warning of a continuance of the flight; and as Reckless Roy noted the strength of the enemy and the precautions they had taken, upon him was forced the conviction that the struggle pending would be a most desperate one.

The minutes wore slowly away, till the moonlight gave place to the gray and purple of early dawn, when the young outlaw was suddenly joined by Idaho.

"Cap, there's something derved strange back in the timber," the lieutenant exclaimed. "Two galoots have crept through the lines and want to join our forces!"

CHAPTER VI.

RED PANTHER'S DEMAND—THE BATTLE.

"Hoppin' hornits! Ole Calamity, I've hearn ov ye ever sense I've bin big enough ter tote a rifle or rattle a red!" ejaculated the big hunter, as the hoarse chuckle died out of his throat. "Pears's if we stood on ther same platform, too! Shake!"

And parting the bushes, the Hercules crept into the little opening.

Old Calamity eyed him a moment, then frankly extended his hand, saying:

"Pears es ef I'd hearn ov ye, Big David, though I cain't jest place ye. But ye look honest, an' are too big ter be sneakin'. Thar's my han', Davy."

Then the two men put up their weapons, crossed palms, and settled down to compare notes.

"Whar d'ye drop from, Calamity, an' what's this leetle game ye're up to?" the big hunter asked, when he had gotten his massive form into a comfortable position. "Didn't I see ye slidin' through ther grass a bit ago, straddle ov an ole cayuse?"

"Ye did, David—ye did! An' thet ole cayuse war my pard, Pepper, ther knowin'est critter that ever slapped ther starch out ov a smoky-hide," the old borderman replied. "Ye see, David, I'm a plain man, an' a man not much given ter gab; but this one p'int both Pepper an' me are finicky in—we wanter die carm an' peaceful-like. We're both gittin' old, an' the constant friction ov rubbin' out reds is tellin' on us. We're jest able ter toddle along, an' our narves are completely upshot. We're clean tired ov calamities an' misfortunes, an' we moseyed up inter these wilds in ther vain hope ov findin' some nice, quiet spot uncontaminated by ther pestiferous red-skin, whar we c'u'd lay our weary bodies an' gently drift ter t'other shore. But no! ther varlets w'u'dn't hev et. Whar-ever we lay down ter breathe our last, they'd come an' rout us out. Last night we give 'em ther slip, an' laid ourselves out in this noble grove ter await ther eend. An' again were we disappointed, David, fer along comes a wheen ov outlaws, an' ter avoid a calamity we up an' ske-daddled."

"But, David, we didn't kalkilate ter go fer, Pepper an' me didn't, fer we'd see'd enough ter set ev'ry gallon ov our good blood a-b'ilin', fer them conjemmed varlets hed kaptered a pore lone female. So I jest planted Pepper out thar in ther grass, an' slipped back ter see what I c'u'd do."

"An' now, Davy, what be *you* doin' hyar?"

"I jest crawled in hyar fer a cat-nap," the Hercules explained, settling closer to the earth and combing his long red-brown beard with his fingers. "I've lost my boss, an' am hoofin' et to ards Empire, whar I'm ter meet my pard—ef we both pull through. We left Slocum City, over in Montaner, 'bout ten days ago, an' headed fer ther Black Hills, es my pard'd got a letter invitin' 'im over ter help round up Ole Red Panther's gang. Night afore last, a passel ov red bucks jumped us, an' we war forced to separate, but 'greed ter meet at Empire, es et war near thet p'int we expected ter j'ine Reckless Roy. My pard war forced off ter ther north—"

"Reckless Roy! ye don't mean ter tell me ye're goin' ter j'ine han's with thet young bell-yun, David!" interrupted Old Calamity, suspiciously. "Mud-cats an' boun' pups! he's the biggest fish in ther hull outlaw puddle!"

"More Regulator than outlaw, Calamity, though thar is a price on his head," mildly protested the Hercules. "I'll tell ye somethin'. Ev'ry relative ther boy hed war slaughtered in ther Red Canyon massacre, ov ther hull fam'ly he alone escapin'. He swore vengeance, an' took ther trail, an' soon diskivered that ther chief mover back ov thet hellish affair hed be-

come one ov ther moguls ov Deadwood. In a fair, square fight, he shot the dirty cuss dead, an' fer thet act he war outlawed, ther friends an' allies ov his victim bein' men ov influence. No, siree, Calamity; I cain't consider Reckless Roy an outlaw, knowin' his hull career es I do. An' thar's not a man in the band but's suffered deadly wrong at ther hands ov outlaw or red-skin. Ther Regulators hev never lifted a han' ag'in' an honest man, and never will. D'ye s'pose Gold-Dust Dan'd—"

"Is yer pard Gold-Dust Dan, David?" broke in Old Calamity, with no little interest.

"Ye bet he is, an' ther friend ov Reckless Roy ter boot!"

"B'gosh! ef thet be true, I'll cave, David! I've heard ov Dan'l often, an' he's a brave, darin' youth."

At that moment the sound of firearms interrupted the conversation, and the two bordermen made a cautious survey of their surroundings.

To their surprise, they discovered that a sentry had been posted about fifty yards distant, at a point commanding the plain south of the timber.

"Begins ter look es ef we war in fer et, Davy!" observed Old Calamity, in an undertone. "Dey'll be on hand putty soon now, an' et won't be easy ter get off 'thout bein' seen. Ef we're goin' ter risky ther gal, we'd better do et while ther varlets air engaged off ter ther north-'ard, and then slope straight fer Empire."

Big Davy readily assented, and the two moved cautiously into the depths of the timber. It required but a few minutes to locate the wicky-up erected for the captive, but much to their disgust, they found it closely guarded, and were compelled to retreat empty-handed.

"We'll hev ter wait till night comes ag'in," Old Calamity averred, when they had regained the shelter of the covert. "An' b'gosh! I reckon we'd better levant, too, afore we run afoul ov some derved misfortune."

Again the Hercules gave assent, and steadily rose to note the position of the sentry—only to sink back with a startled grunt.

"Hug ther 'arth, Calamity!" he warned, stretching himself flat on his stomach. "One ov ther gang's comin' straight this way!"

Not a breath too soon was that warning whisper, for scarcely had the bushes settled into their wonted quiet when a steady *swish, swish* of the high grass announced the approach of the outlaw.

On and on, and then directly past the thicket, strode the fellow, keeping just outside the timber edge, and when the sound of his steps had died away, Big Davy turned upon Old Calamity a startled face.

"Hoppin' hornits!" he ejaculated. "Calamity, we came near a-makin' a fine muddle ov things!"

"Ther outfit in this timber is Reckless Roy's Regulators!"

"B'mighty! I w'u'dn't won'er ef ye're right, David!"

"Right! I know I'm right. Et war Roy who jest passed!" asseverated the Hercules. "The only question now is, what shall we do?"

And that question was not decided without due argument. Big Davy was in favor of making their presence known and joining issues, for the time, with the young outlaw, while Old Calamity was dubious about so decisive a move.

The old plainsman finally gave reluctant assent to the proposition, however, and quietly followed the Hercules into the outlaw camp.

Never were a band of men more surprised than were the Regulators when the two bordermen stepped unannounced into their very midst.

"Who are you?—what do you want?" Idaho angrily demanded, promptly covering the pair with his revolvers, while the men leaped to their feet with weapons drawn.

"Easy, pard!" returned Old Calamity, airily. "We're two fire-eaters, an' we want yer cap'tin, an' we want 'im ba-ad, fer we're goin' ter j'ine forces 'ith this cohort!"

Idaho nodded grimly.

"Ther cap'tin may decide *thet*!" he responded, pointedly.

"Watch 'em, boys, while I call ther boss."

The arrival of Reckless Roy was not long delayed. At sight of Big Davy, the young outlaw uttered a cry of delight, and sprang forward and warmly grasped his hand.

"And where's Gold-Dust Dan?" he asked, when Old Calamity had been introduced and greetings exchanged all around. "I looked for him with you."

The Hercules explained the non-arrival of the young mountain detective, and then Reckless Roy returned to the post he had abandoned at Idaho's call, where he was joined by the two

recruits as soon as Old Calamity had called in and picketed his cayuse.

"I say, Cap," the old plainsman remarked, as he eyed the warlike array on the crest of the swell, "et do strike me thet ye've got a conjemmed calamitous misfortune a-brewin'—et do, b'gosh! Them reds out thar, an' ther sprinklin' ov whites among 'em especially, mean mischief. They're goin' ter s'round ther timber."

"I believe you're right, Calamity," Reckless Roy returned. "If we can stand them off till our horses are rested thoroughly, we'll cut through their line and run for Empire. Then—"

"Aha! Red Panther at last!"

The road-agent chief had indeed appeared, closely surrounded by over a dozen of his white followers, and as the desperate group came to a halt three chiefs left the line and galloped to the center.

"A move will be made soon, fer thet is a war-council they're holdin'," averred Old Calamity, his dim blue eyes lighting up with a strange fire.

Five minutes passed, then the chiefs spurred back to their places, and the long line broke, half sweeping around the eastern side of the motte, half to the west, the ends of the long line meeting and forming a circle.

Not a word spoke Reckless Roy or his companions. All had foreseen the move, and impatiently awaited the one to follow.

It was not long delayed, for no sooner was the line complete than forth from his followers rode Red Panther, mounted on a powerful bay horse, and carrying at the end of his rifle-barrel a white handkerchief.

"A truce! I'll see what the wretch has to say!" exclaimed Reckless Roy, and he boldly advanced to meet the notorious renegade and road-agent.

Old Calamity and Big Davy gazed at Red Panther with no small degree of curiosity, as it was the first time either had seen him.

The renegade was tall, sinewy and well-formed. He wore a full suit of buckskin, which had been dyed a bright scarlet, and his sombrero, pinned up on one side with a massive gold star, and ornamented with a triple gold cord and a single long, black ostrich-plume, was of the same color. Gold spurs were at the heels of his high cavalry boots, and his rifle and revolvers were ornate with the same precious metal. A broad sash of black silk encircled his waist, and on each shoulder, worn as an epaulet, was the dried forefoot of a huge panther.

Masses of dark and red hair clustered around his shoulders, and his beard, only a shade lighter, fell almost to his waist. His eyes were large, jet-black and brilliant, gleaming savagely through the eyelets of his sable half-mask.

A striking figure—a figure at once odd and terrible, was Red Panther.

Straight down to the edge of the sluggish little stream he rode, and there paused to await the approach of Reckless Roy.

The young outlaw was only a moment later in reaching the southern bank of the stream, where he halted, resolutely facing his redoubtable adversary.

"I come to propose terms, young man," Red Panther announced, in a voice of purring softness. "Are you ready to listen?"

"As well now as ever," Reckless Roy returned, with a scornful curl of his red lips. "Proceed."

"You have a young lady captive in your camp?"

"We have a young lady under our protection, yes."

"Well, Reckless Roy, we want that girl. She is valuable to us. Deliver her up, and I will withdraw my men and leave you in peace."

"And if I refuse?"

Red Panther's eyes glittered viciously.

"If you refuse, on your head be the result!" he exclaimed, a strain of deadly menace breaking the purring softness of his voice. "You are completely surrounded, Reckless Roy, and I shall stop at nothing to gain my end."

A ringing, scornful laugh escaped the young outlaw.

"No is my answer, Red Panther!" he cried. "And were your force a hundred times as great it would still be no! Go back to your murderous c'an, and attack if you wish!"

Red Panther uttered a fierce oath, and raised his clinched hand.

"Fool!" he grated. "Poor, blind fool! you have sealed your own doom, and that of every man with you!" and wheeling his horse he galloped madly back to his lines.

Reckless Roy returned to the timber.

"Boy!" exclaimed Old Calamity, an expres-

sion of delight mantling his ghastly face, "boy! ye did yerself proud, b'gosh! C'u'd n't 'a' done better myself, b'mighty! Mud-cats an' houn'-pups! but ye putt ther critter in a calamitous ragel! Thort he'd strangle—I jest did!"

"We'll hev a warm time before many minutes," Big Davy declared. "See! he's sendin' runners along ther line."

"Oh, no doubt he means business," grimly remarked Reckless Roy, and leaving the two men on guard he hurried back into the timber.

Five—ten minutes passed, then, just as the sun peeped above the eastern horizon a burst of yells announced the approach of the attacking party.

Down upon the motte they thundered, with not an opposing shot to check their headlong speed till within fifty yards of the goal. Then the rifles of the Regulators opened in a dull, continuous roar, and the battle was on.

CHAPTER VII.

DAN IN DISGUISE—MEDIA'S CHALLENGE.

A YELL, faint but triumphant, followed the fall of Gold-Dust Dan, and the hidden assassin sprung half-erect, only to drop back in his lair—weak, helpless, his face distorted with keenest agony.

An Indian youth, on his first war-trail, and that trail his last; for he was wounded unto death, the life-current streaming from a shattered hip and two gaping wounds in his brawny breast.

The revolver slipped from his nerveless hand, his head fell back, and in another minute he was dead.

An hour—two hours slipped by, without a sound to break the silence hanging over the grisly scene; then with a faint sigh Gold-Dust Dan slowly raised himself upon one elbow and wearily looked at his grim surroundings.

Mechanically his hand sought his head, and as his fingers encountered a gaping furrow in his scalp, he sprung to his feet and caught up his rifle.

Back into the shadows he glided, and again searched the grove. And again he found it deserted.

Puzzled by the mystery surrounding that dastardly shot which had so nearly cost him his life, Gold-Dust Dan at length gave over the search and retraced his steps to the point where he had left his horse.

"I'll take a peep at Red Panther's trail, then decide first what to do," he muttered, and mounting he rode out into the plain, where the trail lay broad and deep.

Long and earnestly the youth studied the maze of footprints, then galloped back to the timber, dismounted and singled out the body of a Sioux warrior, from which he stripped the gaudy war-trappings.

Then out into the moonlight at the edge of the motte the young detective strode, and with the aid of a small pocket-mirror set himself to his strange task.

The gray light of dawn was tinging the Eastern sky when he arose, and so perfectly was he disguised as a Sioux brave that the scrutiny of the keenest red-skin in all the nation might have been defied to detect the imposture.

Just in time, too, was that startling metamorphosis completed, for even as the detective gained his feet his ears were greeted by a low, sweet chant, as weird as mournful.

Startled, mystified, he sprung into the saddle and urged his horse across the motte, drawing rein in the dense shadows, to sweep the Western plain with anxious eyes.

It was a strange scene that met his gaze.

Two hundred yards away and advancing at a measured pace, came Roving Ruth, astride the great white stallion and uttering that weird, plaintive chant.

Behind the mysterious woman, mounted on black horses and riding two abreast, came eight sable figures, bearing in their midst a huge white cross.

A dozen paces from the edge of the motte, the strange cavalcade halted. At a word of command from Roving Ruth, the eight black riders dismounted and with shovels they carried began work, cutting away the tough prairie sod for a long trench.

"They came to bury the dead," mused Gold-Dust Dan, shaking off the fascination that for the moment had held him. "Come, Prince! we must get away from this, for it is growing light and we are in the guise of the enemy."

And wheeling his horse, the disguised detective recrossed the timber island and spurred away to the southward, on the trail of Red Panther.

Onward, breasting that galling, deadly fire

with grim courage, swept Red Panther's horse—on, till the surging line touched the motte on every side. Then—cool, steady, and as yet unscathed—forth from cover leaped the Regulators, and the sharp cracking of revolvers took the place of the roar of rifles.

Before that merciless, unerring storm of lead no foe could stand. The red line wavered, then broke, and in a moment more was in full flight.

"Your rifles, boys, and make every bullet count!" thundered Reckless Roy, his dark eyes aflame with fierce triumph. "Teach the devils a lesson they'll never forget!"

"Reckon they've 'most got thet lesson, Cap," uttered Idaho, pausing at the young outlaw's side. "Thar's full twenty dead, an' as many more wounded or unhorsed."

"And our men, Idaho?"

"Lots o' scratches, but only one killed, as far as I've seen."

"Bad, yet far better than I expected."

At that moment there came a lull in the firing, and the two men separated, Idaho hastening away to reform the broken line, while Reckless Roy returned to his stand at the north end of the island.

"Cap, thar's more mischief a-brewin', b'gosh!" asseverated Old Calamity, as the young outlaw came up: "Red Panther got off with a hull hide, an' ef I ain't mistook he's goin' ter call up more ov ther smoky-hides. Jest look out yender."

A glance across the plain verified the old ranger's assertion that there was trouble brewing. Red Panther had retreated to a safe distance, and was now surrounded by a group of renegades and Sioux braves, all watching the movements of a half-dozen warriors a short distance to the eastward.

"I opine they're goin' ter send up signal smoke," continued Old Calamity. "They're fixin' fer three separate columns, too, an' 'cordin' ter thet we're goin' ter hev high-jinks byme-by."

"I'm afraid so," Reckless Roy admitted.

Eagerly the trio watched the maneuvers of the distant red-skins. Presently three columns of dense smoke mounted upward through the calm morning air, one after the other, and the worst fears of the little party were confirmed.

"We're in for it," declared the young outlaw, with a grim smile. "Were our horses less jaded, I'd favor a dash for the camps; as it is, we must beat the devils off or go under."

"Wal, et do look conjummed misfortunate," Old Calamity observed. "But they ain't got us yit. Thar's room fer us ter feel a heap sight wuss 'n we do, b'mighty."

"Ef we c'u'd on'y 'a' wiped out Red Panther, et'd 'a' ended ther muss, short-off," remarked Big Davy, regretfully. "Ther cuss must b'ar a charmed life. I drew a dead bead on his carcass four times, an' he never so much as flinched!"

"Try his head next time," advised Reckless Roy. "It is said he wears a coat of mail, which doubtless explains your failure."

Big Davy nodded grimly. Then silence came over the party, and for a half-hour no one spoke.

At the expiration of that time, their continued surveillance having discovered nothing, Reckless Roy turned back to consult Idaho and to look after affairs in the timber, and it was not until noon that he rejoined the bordermen.

"Anything new?" he asked, as he again crouched down between them.

"Nothin', on'y twenty-five or thirty reds hev come straggin' in," replied Old Calamity. "Reckon ther critter's got about his full force mustered."

"Then if luck stays with us, we'll have little to fear."

"But look yonder!" and starting half-erect, Reckless Roy pointed across the plain.

"Red Panther, an' with a flag ov truce!" ejaculated Big Davy.

True enough; the renegade chief was again approaching, bearing aloft a white flag.

"What can the fellow mean?" continued Reckless Roy, for the moment nonplused. "What's his game this time?"

"Et's ther old story—he wants us ter give up ther gal 'bout a fight," Old Calamity declared. "I reckon he hes an idea we're weaker'n we war this mornin'."

"Possibly," assented Roy. "It strikes me, though, his coming is to mask some treacherous move on the part of the red-skins. Just keep an eye on them and I'll go meet him."

And forth from the shelter of the island again strode the young outlaw, halting as before on the southern bank of the little stream cutting through the plain.

Red Panther was only a moment later in reaching the rendezvous.

"Well, young man, I've come to offer you yet another chance," the renegade announced.

"A chance at what? The total annihilation of your gang?"

"I came to talk sense, Reckless Roy!" was the fiercely uttered rejoinder. "I have no time for foolish badinage."

"You and your men are completely hemmed in by a force even stronger and more determined than that which assailed you this morning. If we attack, sheer weight of numbers will give us the victory, and not a man of you shall be spared."

"But while certain of final success, I know that it would be purchased at dear cost—the lives of many of my men, and to avoid further bloodshed I have come here to make you a proposition."

"It is this:

"The girl in your camp, one Media Bradlaw, has in her possession a small steel casket—a trinket now utterly valueless to her, but most valuable to me. Give over that casket, and I pledge you my word I'll withdraw my men and leave you free to go when and where you will with the girl."

"Now, Reckless Roy, think over the matter, and think well, for in one hour I shall return for an answer, and that answer must be final."

And Red Panther wheeled his horse to ride away.

"Hold, chief!" cried Reckless Roy, sternly. "I have decided, and you shall have an answer now!"

"First, though, let us see if I fully understand the matter."

"According to report, among the first white men to enter the Black Hills in search of gold was John Bradlaw, the brother of Media Bradlaw. With him were two sworn friends. The three found gold—found it in abundance, and for nearly two years worked a secret mine, at the end of each month storing away in some hidden place their golden earnings."

"Then came the great influx of fortune-hunters. Deadwood sprung up, the Hills were overrun with gold-mad miners, and Bradlaw and his friends were discovered."

"The three were alone, their claim was in an isolated recess of the hills, and an evil gang led by one Flush Frank, a gambler, conceived the idea of routing the pards and jumping the claim. The attempt was successful, one of the three miners being killed, while Bradlaw and his surviving pard, Jubal Bennet, were forced to flee for their lives."

"The two succeeded in reaching Rapid City, and there organized a force to retake their claim. Knowing that a desperate struggle was before them, Bradlaw and Bennet drew up a paper, accurately describing the exact location of the buried treasure. This paper was torn in two from corner to corner. Bradlaw inclosed his half, with a letter fully explaining the situation save as to the location of the treasure, in a small steel casket, and expressed it East to his father. Bennet disposed of his fragment in a similar manner, except that he deposited his casket with Jake Rose, a banker in Rapid City, to be held until called for by himself, by John Bradlaw, or John Bradlaw's duly accredited heirs."

"This precaution taken, the two men went forth to do battle for their property; but their party was defeated, Bennet receiving a wound from which he died ere reaching Rapid City, while John Bradlaw fell at the mine, shot down by Flush Frank."

"That was nearly a year ago, Red Panther, and now you have secured the casket left in the keeping of Jake Rose, but to secure the golden treasure must also have that held by Media Bradlaw."

"Is it not so?"

The renegade uttered an oath.

"Yes, it is so, Reckless Roy," he admitted, after a moment's deliberation. "You have described the situation exactly."

"And now, your answer?"

"That in due time, Red Panther," was the stern reply. "I do not know that Media Bradlaw possesses the casket; but that there may be no mistake between you and me, let me finish."

"The great question with me is, who are you? Are you Jake Rose? Or Flush Frank? Or are you simply a murderous tool in the hands of one or both of these men?"

"Curse your tongue!" gritted the renegade. "I'll never—"

"Wait!" interrupted Reckless Roy. "I'll not ask you to disclose your identity. Suffice it that I know your color. I overheard you plotting with Hackamore Hank two nights ago, and that was enough!"

"Having orphaned Media Bradlaw, you would

now rob her of the gold—slay her, if need be, to obtain your end.

"My answer, Red Panther, is this:

"Between you and me there can be no compromise! Not the girl, not the casket, not so much as a tress of her hair, would I deliver into your foul keeping as the price of life itself!

"Do you understand me? Is that plain enough? Begone, you dastardly hound! Get back to your kind, or, by heavens! I'll forget your truce, and riddle you with lead!"

Loud, clear as a bugle's note rung the voice of the young outlaw; his hands were upon his revolvers, and his flashing eyes betrayed the deepest feeling.

Red Panther recoiled, then started sharply. His lips moved, but with a mighty effort he choked back the torrent of curses called up by that bold defiance.

"Spoken like a hero, my friend, yet I crave permission to act for myself," uttered a clear, flute-like voice, and down to the brink of the stream, rifle in hand, rode Media Bradlaw, pale and determined, her blue eyes glowing and glittering with an appalling fire.

"You here?" gasped Reckless Roy, reeling blindly. "Go back to the timber! You are in deadly danger!"

"Nay, I shall remain!" Media returned, sternly. "You have incurred peril enough for me and mine.

"Go, you, and leave me with this murderous wretch!"

"Thanks, my beauty! Such words were almost praise from your sweet lips!" cried Red Panther, with an ill-concealed sneer. "By heavens! I've a mind to possess you as well as your treasure!"

A hoarse, inarticulate cry burst from the lips of Reckless Roy, and swift as thought he drew and leveled a revolver.

"Wait!" enunciated Media, her firm white hand closing around the weapon and forcing it down. "Have I not suffered at his hands? Leave him to me! If I fail, then may you avenge me!"

Mutely, reluctantly, his eyes aglow with suppressed fury, the young outlaw returned the weapon to his belt and awaited the outcome of that strange scene.

Media turned to the renegade, her eyes meeting his burning gaze unwaveringly.

"Well, my lady-bird!" mockingly exclaimed Red Panther, after a moment. "You came here to meet me. Now, what is it?"

"To challenge you to mortal combat I came!" was the ringing reply. "In cold blood you have slain the last of my kindred. Dare you meet me face to face, you to contend for the prize you've stooped so low to gain, I to seek the vengeance justly mine? Or is the last spark of brute courage within you dead?"

And aloft in the burning rays of the mid-day sun, Media flashed the casket of glittering steel.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BOLD STROKE—GOLD GULCH.

A HOARSE cry escaped Red Panther as his gleaming eyes encountered the coveted casket, and for just a breath of time it seemed that he would plunge forward and hazard all an attempt to grasp and wrest it away.

"Stand!—you devil!" warningly uttered Reckless Roy, divining the thought uppermost in the mind of the renegade. "One step, and you'll never take another!" and again his revolver swung up to a level.

"Easy, my rash young friend!" was the grim rejoinder. "I'll never tempt Providence at your hands!"

"And now, my dainty lady, to your challenge—yes! You're a girl of grit, and I like you the better for it.

"But I shall not slay you. I'll make you captive, for your beauty and your spirit have won my fancy.

"Now name your terms, and let the game go on."

Media bowed haughtily.

"The terms are simple," she returned. "Do you ride back a hundred yards, and I'll cross the stream, when both shall be at liberty to fire. If I fail, then the casket is yours, and my friends must be permitted to depart unmolested; should I slay you; my kindred shall have been avenged.

"Agreed, with one exception. If Reckless Roy is to remain on the field, then one of my men must be permitted to come forward to guard against treachery or interference on his part."

Again Media inclined her head, and wheel-

ing his horse Red Panther galloped back the required distance, then halted and commanded a warrior standing slightly apart from his fellows.

As Media noted the renegade's movements, the steely glitter in her blue eyes deepened. Turning to Reckless Roy, she mutely extended her hand.

The young outlaw eagerly clasped it between both of his own.

"Media Bradlaw, you must give up this mad idea," he protested, in a voice husky with emotion. "You meet that merciless devil in a fight to the death! Girl, it is madness! You shall not do it!"

Media withdrew her hand.

"I can, and I will!" she returned coldly. "Not while he lives shall I know peace or rest. He has wronged me deeply, cruelly, and I must strike for vengeance.

"As for the peril, I care naught for it. I am willing, even anxious, to meet him on an equal footing, for I am a dead shot and will snuff out his life as I would the flame of a candle!"

"Let me take your place," urged the youth, with nervous energy. "Let me—"

"I thank you, sir, but it cannot be," interrupted the girl, sternly, and then a touch of her spur drove Hurricane into the sluggish stream ere Reckless Roy could lift a hand.

Meanwhile, Old Calamity and Big Davy had not been idle.

Surprised by the sudden appearance of Media Bradlaw, they had at once become deeply interested in the strange scene, and awaited its outcome with no little anxiety.

Nearly every word spoken beside the sluggish little stream had been heard by them; they believed a desperate crisis was at hand, and each crouched behind his leafy covert with rifle ready.

Then, just as Red Panther turned back to the position assigned him, Idaho hastily approached the two rangers, and it became evident at a glance that the outlaw lieutenant was greatly perturbed.

"Call in ther cap'n an' ther gal," he requested, in a hurried tone. "Do it cautiously, too, so's not to alarm ther gang out thar. We've got hot work ahead."

And he turned to hurry back into the depths of the timber.

"Mud-cats an' houn' pups! Don't go off at a run, man!" protested Old Calamity. "What's gone wrong?"

"A lookout in ther trees reports a big band o' reds on'y three miles ter ther north, headin' this way at a lope. With them, Red Panther'll hev force enough ter crush us by sheer weight o' numbers. We must be up an' doin'."

At that moment from over the plain came a faint signal.

Big Davy started. A peculiar look crossed his face, and he narrowly scanned the distant group of red-skinned horsemen.

Old Calamity, regarding Idaho intently, uttered a long whistle.

"Things do be gittin' calamitous, b'gosh!" he exclaimed. "We can't git ther cap'n nor ther gal jest now, Idaho. Ther leetle she-tiger's got a duel on hand with Red Panther, an' in course Cap'n Roy won't come in till that's settled."

"A duel with Red Panther—ther gal?" ejaculated Idaho, his agitation visibly increasing. "Good Lord! why did I give her permission ter ride out thar!"

"Case ye c'u'dn't help yerself, I reckon!" chuckled Old Calamity. "But, Idaho, we can't make sech a bad matter wuss, b'mighty! so ye take my advice. Jest git ther critters ready fer a run, an' hev yer men so's ye kin call 'em in at a minute's warnin', fer I'm thinkin' we'll hev ter cut our way out, b'gosh!"

Idaho nodded assent.

"I've got things fixed jest thet way," he averred, and turning he strode away.

Scarcely had the sound of his hasty steps become inaudible, when from across the stream came the sharp detonation of a rifle.

It was the report of Media Bradlaw's gun.

The girl had ridden out into the plain full fifty yards, and there halted and fired.

Red Panther remained upright in the saddle, a grimly defiant smile on his full lips. Evidently the girl's bullet had gone wide of the mark.

Again Media raised the rifle, took deliberate aim at the heart of the renegade, and fired; and again was the shot without apparent result.

Then for several minutes the girl regarded her foe with strange intentness. What could it mean? She was perfectly cool and collected, and her hands were as steady as those of a veteran borderman could have been. Yet she had fired

twice with deadly aim, and Red Panther sat untouched and unharmed.

Impelled by some subtle impulse, she turned her gaze upon the red-skin guard—a magnificent specimen of the Sioux brave, mounted upon a powerful coal-black horse, armed *cap-a-pie*, and carrying in his right hand, hidden from the maiden's view, a coiled lariat!

Slightly to the rear, and ten paces to the east of his chief, was his guard, and as Media glanced toward him he slowly raised his left hand and pressed it for a moment against his hideously-painted face.

Was there aught significant in that simple movement? Was it intended to convey a hidden meaning—to covertly disclose the vulnerable point in her seemingly imperforable foe? The very source of the suggestion compelled a negative answer!

And yet that movement influenced the course of the girl. Her eyes emitted a steady glitter, and her red lips settled in straight, hard lines. Swift as thought the rifle rose to her shoulder, and again its sharp report broke across the plain.

Red Panther swerved in his saddle, and a lock of his long red hair fell to the ground.

That shot, so nearly fatal, roused the renegade into action. Uttering a fierce yell, he flung himself forward in the saddle and spurred his horse into a run.

Media saw her peril, and was prompt to act. Raising her ready repeater, she pressed the trigger, and with a scream almost human in its intensity, the noble bay went down, hurling his reckless rider end over end.

There was the look of a fiend on Red Panther's face as he scrambled up from the luckless tumble. Drawing his revolvers, he charged straight toward the dauntless girl, uttering an oath at every jump.

Then four reports crashed out as one, for as Media and her foe exchanged shots, Reckless Roy and the red-skin guard also fired, and the renegade chief fell back, with blood gushing in a torrent from his face.

A warning yell from Reckless Roy, and the rapid cracking of his revolvers, gave notice to the girl of a fresh peril, and she wheeled her horse to confront the red-skin guard.

Too late! With the fall of Red Panther, the Indian had touched spur to his horse and swept forward, covering the distance between himself and the girl in less than the time it takes to describe the act; and as Media turned, a triple coil of the lariat fell and tightened around her, pinning her arms and her rifle against her sides, while a red hand grasped Hurricane's reins!

A burst of exultant yells from the red-skins strung around the motte—a single answering whoop from the quick-witted brave, then due-west across the plain he sped, the gallant little horse of his captive keeping pace with his own clean-limbed black.

Dazed, stunned by this bold stroke, stood Reckless Roy, till that savage outburst warned him the game was slipping from his hands. Then thrusting his revolvers back into his belt, he seized and leveled his rifle.

"Stay! Fire not! That brave is Gold-Dust Dan disguised, an' he'll save ther gal or perish! Foller me!"

And Big Davy's hand closed 'round the rifle-barrel, forcing it up just as the young outlaw fired.

Reckless Roy turned to the Hercules a startled, incredulous face.

"Come!" urged the big hunter, sharply, as he pointed to the border of the timber. "Ther horses aire ready, an' ther boys mountin'. Rus'le, now, or we're too late ter make ther game!"

A glance confirmed the words, and with a determined shout Reckless Roy bounded back and vaulted into his saddle.

"Forward!" he ordered, in a ringing voice, and away in swift pursuit of the fleeing brave thundered the daring Regulators.

Then, as the warrior and his captive swept safely by, from right and left the red-skins moved to the center, massing to block the way—to hurl back the charging cavalcade; but onward, with a fierce, resistless rush, swept the brigade, their deadly rifles pouring out a continuous volley.

With saddles emptied on every hand—with men and horses going down at every breath, that reckless charge was more than Indian nature could stand. A single vain attempt to roll back the tide of defeat, then the red horde broke and darted away in open flight.

Stopping only long enough to pick up their wounded and their dead, the Regulators again pressed on, and in a moment more closed 'round

Media and her captor, now known to all as Gold-Dust Dan.

Just in time had the motte been abandoned, for as Reckless Roy and his band coursed away to the northwest, a backward glance discovered a strong force of Sioux warriors, under command of a tall war-chief, pouring over the crest of a distant swell in hot pursuit.

Gold Gulch!

For months that had been a magic name in the Black Hills region, the camp itself the Mecca of the fortune-seeking pilgrims. From every quarter they had come, singly, in pairs and in groups, until the camp's denizens numbered about half a thousand.

Then the bubble burst.

The mines "played out"—dwindled to two in number; a hegira followed quick upon the heels of the exploded boom, and within a week from the break the population of Gold Gulch was less than a hundred.

And yet, the Gulch was rated a "live" camp. The two mines in operation yielded handsome returns, and there was employment, at good wages, for all willing to work.

Then there was a hotel, a number of stores, and two or three dance-halls, while nightly, in the half-dozen saloons and gambling-dens whisky and cards held sway.

Down in the little valley below the camp was a graveyard, too, and it was the boast of the Gulchites that not a man buried there had failed to meet death with his boots on.

Another point on which the rough miners prided themselves was the camp's government—"Ther best in ther hull deestrick," they were wont to declare.

Sidney Graft, owner of the two mines, and generally known as "Sleek Sid," was the mayor of the camp, and a burly giant answering to the unique name of Weeping Moses filled the office of marshal, while three of the most influential citizens served as a town council, with powers judicial as well as legislative.

Just at sunset of the second day after the successful enactment of Gold-Dust Dan's daring ruse to rescue Media Bradlaw, four horsemen drew rein at the door of The Mint, the Gold Gulch hostelry.

The foremost of the four was Gold-Dust Dan, now divested of his red-skin disguise. Behind him were Media Bradlaw, Reckless Roy and Idaho.

The young Regulator chief was pale and haggard, and was strapped in his saddle in a position as comfortable as possible. It required no second glance for the loungers to determine that he was severely wounded.

Dan dismounted and hurried into the hotel to secure rooms for the party. On his return, Reckless Roy was lifted from his saddle and carried up-stairs, while the landlord sent a miner in search of the camp's surgeon.

"Doc" Leech was not long in making his appearance. He skillfully dressed the wounds of the young outlaw, installed Idaho and Media as nurses, and quietly took his departure.

Shortly after nightfall, two men rode into the camp and sought the quarters of Gold-Dust Dan. They were Old Calamity and Big Davy.

Together, with Media Bradlaw, the three men remained closeted till a late hour. When the conference was ended, Old Calamity and Big Davy quitted the hotel and rode away, one going north, the other south.

And early the next morning, Gold-Dust Dan mounted Prince and galloped out of Gold Gulch, taking the trail to Rapid City.

CHAPTER IX.

JACOB ROSE, THE BANKER—AN AMBUSH.

OVER the doorway of a certain building fronting on the principal street of Rapid City hung a sign, containing the following, in bold red letters on a black ground:

"JACOB ROSE,
"BANKER AND BROKER.
"MINES BOUGHT AND SOLD."

Late in the afternoon of the day on which Gold-Dust Dan quitted Gold Gulch, a rough-looking man walking leisurely through the street espied this sign, and stopped and slowly, letter by letter, made out the words thereon.

Then an expression of deep satisfaction came over his face.

"By crimony! et's ole Jake Rose's place, fast enough!" he muttered, and quickening his steps he approached and entered the building.

"I want see Jake Rose, and I want see 'im mighty quick," he brusquely announced to the solitary occupant of the outer office, a thin

little old man, who was evidently a clerk. "Got him 'round hyar anywhar?"

"Is your business very important? Mr. Rose is very busy this afternoon," was the clerk's response, as his keen little eyes ran over the visitor. "Can I not attend to your wants as well?"

"Nary, ole man—nary! Git yer gimblet eyes off'n my duds, an' perjure ther ole original Jakey Rose ter wurst, or I'll ber-derned ef I don't make ye think Solomon's riz in all his ga-lory! Git, I say!"

And the burly stranger poked the muzzle of a cocked revolver under the old man's nose.

"All right! all right!" cried the clerk, hastily. "Give me your name, and I'll take it to Mr. Rose. He's just back from Cheyenne, and is up to his ears in business, but will see you if possible."

"Again, ole man, I say—nary!" uttered the bully, menacingly. "I'm Durango Dave, I am, but thet's nuther hyar nor thar. Jest ye lead ther way ter his noble jukeship, an' I'll interjuge merself. An' now—scat!"

Realizing the utter futility of further parley, old Silas Lunt reluctantly led the way into a rear hall, and thence to the door of a private office of Jacob Rose, where he paused.

"This ther place?" demanded Durango Dave, suspiciously.

"Yes; Mr. Rose is inside. I'll knock."

"No, ye won't. Ye'll scoot—skip! Hop er-long lively, or by ga-lory, I'll help ye!"

Then, as Silas Lunt beat a hasty retreat to the outer office, Durango Dave flung open the door and strode into the banker's room.

Jacob Rose started up from his desk and boldly confronted the intruder.

"What do you mean? What do you want here?" he demanded, his black eyes snapping angrily.

"I mean biz—strictly biz; an' ef ye're ther ole original Jakey Rose, I might want *you*!" was the significant reply, and the rough closed the door and braced his broad shoulders against it. "I'm Durango Dave, I am, an' I'm a hum-min' bird f'm sev'ral counties back, an' when I howl ther wolves keep still—you bet!"

A peculiar expression crept into the banker's swarthy face, and he nodded grimly.

"I see! I see!" he exclaimed, extending his hand. "Your disguise is perfect, Re—"

"No names, please!" laughed the rough, as he took the proffered hand. "It's my first trip here, and I hated to come, but had to."

"We must get ready for war, Jake!"

"I thought we had done that."

"So we had, but our plans all failed, and now fresh complications have presented themselves."

"The party was hotly pursued, and made a running fight, in which Reckless Roy was badly wounded and several of his men killed. After running into two deadly ambushes, the red-skins grew sick of the job and backed out; and as Red Panther was not at hand to lead them, the renegades grew wary, made a feint at withdrawing from the chase, and under cover trailed the game home."

"And, Jake, you may know the situation is most grave when I tell you the girl and her friends are now in Gold Gulch!"

The banker chuckled grimly.

"I see no cause for alarm in that," he averred. "They certainly can suspect nothing."

"Oh, but they do," cried Durango Dave, with an oath. "It turns out that the red-skin who ran the girl through our lines back there at the timber island, was none other than that young mountain terror, Gold-Dust Dan, in disguise. He has enlisted in the girl's cause, too, and last night they held a confab to map out their campaign. I got onto it, and through Landlord Jerry managed to hear most of the talk."

"Not only do they suspect you of double-dealing, Jake, in the matter of the casket, but they know that the Gold Gulch Mines were the property of Jack Bradlaw. They intend, not only to bring you to book, but to oust Sleek Sid as well."

At this announcement, the banker's confident look vanished and his face grew dark with rage.

"Oh, the deuce they do!" he exclaimed, shaking his clinched hand. "And how do they intend to proceed?"

"Their first move will be to regain the casket left in your keeping. That accomplished, they can at once recover the buried treasure, and then, with the thews of war thus provided, proceed against Sleek Sid."

"Gold-Dust Dan is now on his way here to demand the casket; in fact, you may expect to meet him at any moment. He left the Gulch at daybreak this morning; I followed an hour

later, coming through the blind pass and thus getting in ahead of him."

"You should have waylaid and finished him," the banker gritted. "I can't give up the casket, and it'll never do to let him come here and pick up a bobbery. We've too much at stake."

"No, no! it will never do! You should have gotten him out of the way—must do it yet."

"Of course, I have receipts to show that I am no longer responsible for the casket; but if that young bloodhound is permitted to live, how long will it take him to nose out our secrets and prove the receipt was forged? There are some weak points in our game, Durango Dave—notably the attempt to secure the Bradlaw casket. Reckless Roy suspects that Red Panther is either you or I, and now we can stop at nothing to save our necks from the halter."

"To save our necks and gain the treasure," amended Durango Dave. "But to play a winning game we'd better let the detective show his hand. The records show that the Gold Gulch Mines were legally transferred from Jubal Bennet to Sidney Graft, while you hold Bennet's receipt for the casket. Now let us see if Gold-Dust is prepared to prove that Bennet was dead before these papers were signed. If so, we've got to shunt him out of the way mighty quick; if not, we can laugh at his claims and bide our time."

The banker nodded moodily, and was about to speak when hasty steps in the hallway caused him to start and change color.

"Can that be *he*?" he exclaimed, with a violent tremor. "In here, Frank—quick!" and he flung open the door of a roomy closet.

Durango Dave needed no urging. With stealthy tread he crossed the room and hid himself, just as there came a knock at the door opening into the hall.

The banker sunk into the chair at his desk. Under such control were his nerves that he was now outwardly cool and collected.

"Enter," he cried, and with the word the door was flung open and into the room strode Gold-Dust Dan.

"Are you Jacob Rose?" the detective asked.

"I am Jacob Rose," the banker replied.

"My name is Daniel Deerfoot," pursued the detective. "I hold the power of attorney from the lawful heir of John Bradlaw, deceased, and come to reclaim a parcel left in your possession some months ago by one Jubal Bennet."

The banker uttered a low whistle.

"Sir, you surprise me!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet. "May I ask to see your power of attorney?"

"Certainly, sir. Here it is," and Gold-Dust Dan handed over a carefully-folded paper.

"It's as straight as a string," commented Rose, as his black eyes ran over the contents of the document. "It is made out, signed, sealed and witnessed in due form."

"I am sorry to inform you, Mr. Deerfoot, that your errand is in the nature of a wild goose chase."

"The parcel in question was called for by Mr. Jubal Bennet in person less than a week from the day it was deposited!"

"If I am not mistaken, I have his receipt for it," and the banker turned to a file of papers on his desk, from which he selected a slip.

Gold-Dust Dan eyed the paper most critically. It was indeed a receipt from Jubal Bennet.

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Deerfoot," continued Rose, calmly stroking his huge black beard. "But you see how the matter is."

"I do indeed," the detective returned, significantly. "I am afraid you have been imposed upon, Mr. Rose. Jubal Bennet was killed three days before this receipt was written, so it must be a forgery."

"Oh, no! the receipt is genuine," asseverated Rose, in a calm, matter-of-fact way that would have gone far toward convincing many a man. "I was intimately acquainted with Bennet, and could not have been imposed on."

"But sit down, Mr. Deerfoot, and let us talk over the matter."

"There is nothing to talk over," declared Dan, bluntly, as he declined the offered chair. "If that casket is gone, it must be found, and that, too, with its contents intact."

"On our part we are prepared to furnish absolute proof that Jubal Bennet's death occurred on a certain date, and that date was prior to the one contained in this receipt."

"I don't think you can produce any such proof!" sneered Rose, anger getting the better of his prudence. "It is you who have been imposed on."

"But if it is war you want, war you can have. My position is impregnable!"

Dan smiled oddly, and his dark eyes looked

straight into the strangely-twitching face of the banker.

"The scars of war are not always so quickly healed or easily hidden, even when dealt by a woman's hand!" he observed, then strode out of the room and quitted the building.

Jake Rose's face was convulsed with rage.

"You've signed your own death-warrant, Gold-Dust Dan!" he gritted. "You know too much!"

Meanwhile, on reaching the street, Dan had paused a moment, and stared moodily around, his brow knitted in thought.

"Might as well have a look at the records and go back to the Gulch. As we've got to fight, we can't get ready too soon.

"Jake Rose is thoroughly aroused, and will now stop at nothing."

Having thus decided, the detective set about his task. Straight to the recorder's office he proceeded, and there found that the Gold Gulch Mine had been duly transferred from Jubal Bennet to Sidney Graft.

"It is as I feared!" he exclaimed, as he noted the entry. "The slippery scoundrels have everything fixed. Strongly fortified, with a show of law on their side, it will indeed take sharp and desperate work to dislodge them.

"It is fortunate Big Davy was a member of Bradlaw's ill-fated force, else we might readily have believed Bennet had indeed escaped and signed these papers."

His errand finished, Dan procured his supper, mounted Prince, and just at sunset rode out of Rapid City.

When a mile beyond the town, a horseman a hundred yards ahead suddenly emerged from the shadows bordering the trail, and calmly awaited the detective's approach.

The waiting rider was Old Calamity.

"Mud-cats an' houn' pups!" ejaculated the ranger, as Dan drew up beside him. "I'm glad ye're out ov that pestiferous nest alive, Daniel. Et's a wicked, calamitous place, Rapid City is, an' four ov et's benighted sinners air in ambush fer ye jest a half mile further on."

"An ambush, eh?" exclaimed Dan, betraying but little surprise.

"Edzactly, Dan, an' they're headed by a cuss in buckskin, who rode inter camp a hafe-hour ahead ov ye this afternoon. F'm words they let drop, I kalkilate they jest naterly intend ter wipe ye off f'm ther face ov ther 'arth, b'gosh!"

CHAPTER X.

DURANGO DAVE'S LAY-OUT—MEDIA MISSING.

LET us now return to the banker's office.

As Gold-Dust Dan quitted the room, the closet door was swung open and Durango Dave reappeared.

"You heard it all, Frank?" inquired Jake Rose, turning to his ally.

"I heard it all," was the grim reply. "But for heaven's sake drop using my name. You forget that Flush Frank is a being of the past, and that Durango Dave now has the floor. I've too many enemies in this camp to take many chances."

"I'll not forget again, Dave; But that young bloodhound has got me rattled. He knows too much."

"He does indeed," assented Durango Dave, helping himself to a chair. "Sit down, Jake. We must arrange to get rid of him."

"That is it, exactly!" the banker cried, with a quick breath of relief. "If we let him, live the Bradlaw girl will oust us, root and branch. Not only will our chance at the buried treasure vanish, but we will be compelled to give up Gold Gulch Mines. No, no! we cannot afford to let him get back to the Gulch with his report!"

"We shall have to move quickly to cut him off, for he may start within an hour or so. It will not take him long to examine the records."

"I'll go shadow him. He hasn't seen me, and so can suspect nothing if we meet. You get three or four of the boys—fellows you can trust, and have them get out of town one by one. Tell them to await my coming a mile down the Gulch trail. As soon as the detective gets ready to start, I'll slip out ahead of him, join the boys and arrange an ambush."

Jacob Rose sprung up exultingly.

"Dave, you've hit the right plan!" he cried, the dark look vanishing from his face. "Go at once, and I'll send out the boys. If you want to see me, you'll find me at the Blazing Stump Saloon."

"I'll not venture in there," Durango Dave declared, with a wry grimace. "Judge Lynch wants me too bad as it is."

"No, I'll not want to see you till the job is done, if you do your part well. Then, I shall come straight here."

"Agreed!" cried the desperate schemer. "I shall await you here."

Durango Dave then took his departure, Rose waiting a few minutes that they might not be seen leaving the building together.

Shortly before sunset, Durango Dave rode out of camp. Half a mile up the trail, he came upon a man waiting by the roadside.

"Good-evenin', cap'n," the fellow saluted, as his glance met that of the desperado in buckskin. "Lookin' fer a pard?"

"Three ov 'em," Durango Dave replied. "You wear good weapons, pard."

"An' kin use 'em," the fellow returned, riding out into the trail. "I'm Number 1. Number 2 an' Number 3 aire on ahead."

The two then rode forward, side by side. In a few minutes a second ruffian appeared, and then a third.

Thus far, Jake Rose had fulfilled his part of his villainous compact to the letter.

When the gang was complete, they drew rein and the three Rapid City roughs looked to Durango Dave for instructions.

"Now, cap'n, w'at is et?" the first of the trio asked.

Durango Dave looked from one to another.

"You were sent here by whom?" he asked.

"Jake Rose," the spokesman replied.

"To do w'at?"

"Ter meet you, an' then down a man."

"Very well. He will be along shortly. We'll ride ahead, dismount and lie in ambush."

"Remember, there must be no failure. Let it be sure work, or none," and there was a menacing ring in Durango Dave's voice.

"Oh, we'll get him!"

"We never misses!"

"Ask Banker Rose ef we ever failed. Reckon he knew us, or he wouldn't 'a' sent us."

Nodding grimly in response to that chorus of protestations, Durango Dave moved on, with eyes alert for a suitable spot.

Half a mile thus, then just as the twilight began to deepen the way grew rough and broken and the word to halt was given.

A mass of rocks lay on one side of the trail, a growth of bushes on the other, and Durango Dave at once stationed the men and led the horses away, tethering them a safe distance back from the trail.

Returning, the desperado posted himself at an advantageous point and patiently awaited the approach of his victim.

The gray twilight gave place to the darkness of night. An hour went by, and Gold-Dust Dan had not appeared.

"Boss, aire ye dead sure ther critter's comin'?" grumbled one of the men, at last.

"Oh, yes, he'll be along directly. I expected him a full half-hour ago. Something has delayed him, but you can count on his coming," Durango Dave replied.

"Reckon this hyar leetle picnic won't be a s'prise party fer him!" chuckled another of the miscreants.

"He'll never know w'at hurted 'im!" boasted another. "When four sech men es us go fer a feller's scalp, why he's jest as good as boxed an' planted!"

"Don't be too sure of that," cautioned Durango Dave. "This fellow is no tenderfoot, and if you give him the ghost of a show he'll make the biggest kind of a fight."

"He's got no show ag'in' four sich men es us," persisted the boaster. "He'd hev ter be—"

Just then an iron hand grasped the fellow's throat, choking off the words, and the next instant he was hurled bodily through the air, to land on his back in the middle of the trail.

As he scrambled to his feet, a faint yell of terror burst from his lips and he broke away at the top of his speed.

Durango Dave sprung up, a revolver in each hand.

"What the—"

"Stand and defend yourselves, you in'uman wretches!" interrupted a stern voice, and Gold-Dust Dan leaped from cover, closely followed by Old Calamity.

With cries of consternation, the two remaining Rapid City roughs rose to their feet and fled, leaving Durango Dave alone to bear the brunt of battle.

Uttering a savage oath, the desperado braced his back against the bowlder and raised his revolvers to fire at the advancing figures.

Too late! Even as he pressed the triggers, strong hands grasped his arms, destroying his aim and dragging him down. A revolver butt descended with crushing force upon his head,

and he fell at full length on the stony trail, senseless.

Durango Dave's lay-out had been met and conquered!

"Quick! Calamity! Let us bind the gentleman!" exclaimed Gold-Dust Dan. "When he comes around, we may be able to squeeze something out of him."

"We kin try, but I doubt ef we git a whimper b'gosh! Ther cuss hes grit, an' he's ther only one in ther hull kapoodle thet showed et, fer t'others broke jest as soon as they see'd thar war a calamitous misfortune a-brewin'."

And the old ranger gave his head a dubious shake.

Leaving Calamity to secure the desperado, Dan hurried away to fetch up the horses, and shortly returned with the animals.

"This critter hes an annymile 'round somewhere in ther bresh, an' we'd better git et," the ranger then suggested. "I've got an idea we'd best tote him straight ter ther Regulator camp, an' we'll be able to jog along faster with another hoss."

Accordingly, Dan glided into the thicket, and in a few minutes succeeded in locating the outlaws' animals.

The four horses were tethered in a bunch, and after a moment's listening to assure himself that none of the trail assassins were prowling about, Dan cautiously approached and singled out one of the animals.

Cutting the hitching-strap, the detective thrust his foot into the stirrup, and swung himself into the saddle just as the animal shied sharply. At the same instant a revolver cracked, and so close to Gold-Dust Dan's face was the muzzle of the weapon, that for a moment the flash blinded him.

With a sharp cry he slipped out of the saddle, missed his footing, and fell heavily to the ground.

"Aha! I've bagged ther game!" exclaimed an exultant voice, and then from behind the horse appeared the dark outlines of a man. "It's an old sayin', but mighty true, thet 'he who runs away may live ter fight another day,' an' Rocky Randall, ye skedaddled back thar jist about right."

And the fellow dropped upon his knees beside the supposed corpse.

It was a fatal move. The butt of a heavy revolver landed upon his head with terrific force, and the trail assassin keeled over, while Gold-Dust Dan, untouched and unharmed, leaped to his feet.

The words uttered by the miscreant convinced Dan that he had been alone, and that nothing was to be feared from the others of the evil crew. Assuring himself that the fellow was senseless, not dead, the detective disarmed him, pinioned his hands and strapped him across the horse.

Cutting out another of the animals, Dan then returned to the trail, where he found Old Calamity awaiting his reappearance with no little anxiety.

A glance at the young detective's captive afforded the old ranger an all-sufficient explanation of the brief racket he had heard, and he silently assisted in getting the prisoners ready for the trip.

When both had been restored to consciousness, they were gagged and lashed upright in the saddle. Then, just as the moon rose, Dan and Old Calamity mounted and set forward on their long ride.

Mile after mile fell behind them. The moon rose higher and higher, then reached and crossed the zenith. Gold Gulch was yet five miles distant, the camp of the Regulators twice that far.

"Dan'l," observed the old ranger, as the party drew rein in a small stream to water the horses, "Dan'l, I see'd su'thin' derved strange, b'gosh! w'en I went inter camp last night. I tained up-stream right hyar, an' about two hundred yards further on rid inter ther purtiest leetle glade I ever putt ther two eyes ov me on. An' right in ther middle ov ther glade, Dan'l, war a lone grave, marked by a big white cross. Thar war letters on ther cross, but it war dark in thar then, an' they war too much fer my ole eyes, b'gosh! Can't see very well now, Dan'l. Ole age is a calamitous misfortune, b'mighty! But about thet cross, Dan'l—I fergot ter look this mornin', es I left in some'at ov a burry, an' I jest wish ye'd ride up thar, tarn ter yer left, shet one eye an' take a squint at them 'ar alphabetical signs. W'at say?"

The detective gave a ready assent, and turned his horse up-stream. It took but a moment to reach the glade, and as Dan glanced over it he felt compelled to admit that Old Calamity's praise of the spot was not misplaced.

Owing to the position of the moon in the heavens, the western half of the beautiful pocket was now in dense shadow; but standing out clear and distinct in the yellow moonlight was the huge white cross spoken of, and Dan started as his gaze fell upon it.

Back to his mind came that strange scene at the edge of the prairie motte in which the Bradlaw party had lost their lives, and he half expected to see Roving Ruth and her black riders lurking amid the shadows.

Straight to the lone grave he rode, and there in black letters on the white body of the cross was the following:

"IN LOVING REMEMBRANCE
OF
JOHN BRADLAW,
KILLED AT GOLD GULCH,
November 10, 187-,
BY
FLUSH FRANK,
THIS CROSS IS ERECTED
BY
ROVING RUTH."

"Ah, it is more of that strange woman's work!" exclaimed the detective, as he nervously scanned the fading lines. "Hers is a bitter history, and I would give much to know it."

His errand accomplished, he hastened back to the trail, and reported to Old Calamity, and then in renewed silence the march to Gold Gulch was resumed.

It yet lacked two hours of daybreak when the camp was reached. The long, winding street seemed utterly deserted, but the horses were urged into a faster pace to avoid the risk of too close a scrutiny from the occupants of the two or three all-night resorts.

The precaution was well taken, for half a dozen tipsy fellows, roused into a semblance of activity by the ringing hoof-strokes of the four horses, lunged out into the street from one of the saloons, with a bellowed order for the night-riders to halt and give an account of themselves.

A mocking laugh from Gold-Dust Dan was the only response, and a moment later the little cavalcade was safely beyond the confines of the Gulch, dashing away toward the distant camp of the Regulators.

At a point about four miles north of Gold Gulch, the party abruptly quitted the trail, entering a narrow gorge leading off to the west, and a mile further on halted in response to a sharp challenge.

As they drew rein, a man emerged from the bushes ahead, and approached with quick, restless strides.

"It's all right, boys. I didn't know you at first," he exclaimed. "But to reach the camp, you'll have to go back a few rods, enter the first fissure on your right and go due south about a mile. The boys have moved."

"You see, this afternoon the Gold Gulch council, headed by the mayor, paid us a visit and ordered us to clear out, as we're not wanted in the vicinity of the camp, and as Big Davy didn't like to cut off the mayor's jib he told the boys to pull up stakes as soon as it was dark and shift camp to avoid a night attack."

Dan and Old Calamity exchanged glances.

"All right, Bob," the detective returned. "We're obliged to you for your information, and will go on to camp. Any word to send in?"

"Nothing, except that all's quiet, with no sign of the Gulchites as yet."

Turning back, the party sought the fissure and bore away to the south. In twenty minutes they reached the camp, where they were greeted by Big Davy, who was now acting chief of the Regulators.

Briefly explaining the presence of the two captives, Gold-Dust Dan had them separated and placed under double guard, then looked after his horse, and turned in for a much-needed sleep.

It was high noon when the detective awoke. A plunge in a neighboring stream, followed by a hearty meal, put him in fine condition for the work in hand, and after a brief conference with Big Davy he carefully cleaned and loaded his weapons, mounted Prince, and started toward Gold Gulch.

He reached the trail, when the rapid clatter of hoofs caused him to draw rein, and the next minute a horseman dashed into view, coming at full speed from the direction of the Gulch.

As he gazed at the rider, Gold-Dust Dan started, and a sharp cry burst from his lips.

The man was Idaho, the Regulator. His clothing was in shreds, his hands were pinioned at his back, and he was bleeding from a dozen wounds.

The recognition was mutual.

"Quick!" cried the outlaw, as Dan reached out and checked the flying horse. "If ye'd save Reckless Roy—ride! Those devils at the Gulch are ready ter lynch him!"

"And the girl?" exclaimed Dan. "Is she—"

"God knows whar the poor critter is. A gang broke inter ther hotel jest after daylight, captured Roy an' myself, tried us as road-agents, an' ordered us hanged. They took me first, putt me astraddle ov this hoss an' led me out fer ther rope; but I broke away and run fer et, an' hyar I am, barrin' ther blood I've drapped on ther way."

Dan nodded grimly. Cutting the thongs pinioning Idaho's hands, he pointed out the way to the Regulator camp.

"Send the boys along at full speed," he requested. "If I'm not too late, I'll hold the devils in check till they come."

And touching spurs to Prince, he sped away at full speed on his perilous mission, his face white and stern, his eyes glittering with an ominous light.

CHAPTER XI.

JAKE ROSE ADOPTS DESPERATE MEASURES.

"Boss, we tried hard, an' got ther wu'st ov et. Ther cuss hed all ov a dozen men waitin' out in ther bresh, an' when they got onto our leetle game they jest walked in upon us from behind, shootin' right and left, an' gobbled up Durango Dave an' Rocky Randall. My pard hyar an' me dropped three of the critters, then lighted out, fer et war getting too derved hot ter breathe."

"We run ag'in' ther biggest kind ov a snag, boss, but did ther best we could, an' hyar we aire."

Such was the report of the attempted assassination conveyed to Jake Rose by the two miscreants who had succeeded in getting back to Rapid City.

As the banker listened, his face flushed, then grew white, and he uttered a groan of dismay.

"Curses on the luck!" he cried, starting to his feet. "I feared as much! We might have known Gold-Dust Dan would not venture to beard the lion in his lair without help at his beck and call."

"Poker Jack, are you ready for a twenty-mile ride?"

"Ready ef I hed a boss, boss. My critter war badly hurted in the scrimmage," unhesitatingly returned the ruffian who had delivered that flaming report.

"I'll give you an order for a horse, and you can start at once. Strike straight for the camp on Elder Creek, and tell Joaquin to take every man and push up to Gold Gulch as soon as day dawns. It is a long ride, but he is not to spare horseflesh."

"Do you understand?"

"I've got et all, boss," and seizing the order Poker Jack hurried out of the office.

"And you, Jim Burns, I want you to remain right here in Rapid City to watch the Gold Gulch trail," pursued the banker, turning to the remaining desperado. "Sandy Barnes will have the day and you the night watch. Report all comers to Silas here in the office."

"Kerrect, boss," and with a nod the fellow departed.

Locking the door, Jake Rose stripped off his huge black beard and a cunningly arranged wig, and threw aside his outer clothing. Then from a secret locker in the wall he produced and donned a complete disguise, including a full suit of fine steel mail and a splendid set of weapons.

When thus arrayed, he stood forth as the Black Hills scourge—Red Panther!

Carefully putting away the discarded articles, the daring outlaw closed the secret locker, sat down to his desk, and on a letter-sheet wrote:

"SILAS:—

"If any one inquires, I have gone to Denver."

"ROSE."

That done, he picked up his rifle, put out the light, and quitted the room. Passing along the hallway to the rear of the building, he entered his private stables, saddled and bridled his horse, mounted and rode out into the night, laying his course toward the Gold Gulch trail and

keeping in the shadows as much as possible until clear of the camp.

The moon was now nearly an hour high, and the outlaw knew he ran a fearful risk in boldly taking to the trail in his present guise.

There was a round price on his head—a sum large enough to tempt any lurking desperado to try a shot from ambush, and then there were brave men in the Hills, who, wronged by the renegade chief, had sworn to have his life if he ever came their way.

But the danger thus braved was less than that to be hazarded by inaction, and with a grim face Red Panther struck spurs to his horse and galloped on.

Five miles up the trail, he swerved abruptly to the north, entering a gorge leading to the blind pass spoken of by Flush Frank.

This course not only lessened his peril, but shortened his ride by many miles, and two hours after midnight he drew rein on the outskirts of Gold Gulch.

A brief survey of his surroundings satisfied him that his approach had been unobserved, whereupon he dismounted and tethered his horse behind a small thicket a hundred yards off the trail.

Then from its place back of his saddle he took a poncho, and with his tell-tale garb hidden beneath its folds, strode boldly down into the camp.

Straight to the hotel he went, entering and passing through the hallway to a door in the rear of the building, which he opened with a key from his pocket.

Passing through into a small chamber, he closed and locked the door, and lighted a lamp, then pressed a bell-knob in the wall.

Red Panther's every move thus far had betrayed the utmost familiarity with his surroundings.

Five minutes passed, then there were stealthy steps in the halls, followed by the click of a key in the lock, and the door opened, admitting the landlord.

"This is a surprise, cap'n," that worthy exclaimed, as he in turn closed and locked the door. "Flush Frank went down to take you the news, but we'd no idea you'd come up."

"Frank is in the hands of the Philistines, and it devolves upon us to get him out," grimly replied Red Panther. "Go, you, and send Sleek Sid and Weeping Mose to me, and see that we are not interrupted or overheard."

Simply nodding, the landlord hurried away.

A few minutes elapsed, and then the mayor and the marshal were ushered into the room.

The first, Sidney Graft, was an under-sized, well-dressed man of thirty years. He was of rather pallid complexion, with sandy hair and beard, a narrow, retreating forehead, and deep-set pale-gray eyes. A keen reader of human nature would have put him down at once as an unprincipled scoundrel.

The marshal, on the other hand, was a big, burly, roughly-dressed man, dark almost as an Indian, with coarse, long black hair and beard, and a Jewish cast of features. His eyes were red and inflamed, and required almost constant wiping; hence the singular sobriquet of Weeping Mose.

"Landlord Jerry tells me Frank has come to grief," the mayor exclaimed, with a startled air, as the Boniface locked the door and took up his station in the hall. "Is it so?"

"I have Poker Jim's word for it," Red Panther replied, and he briefly detailed the day's events.

The other listened with closest attention, and the mayor was the first to speak when the recital was ended.

"It's my opinion you and Frank played right into the detective's hands!" he promptly declared. "The odds are about a hundred to one he was bidding for that very move when he called to see you."

"Et kinder strikes me thet 'ar way, too," the marshal observed, with an extremely sagacious air. "An' et's a derved bad business. Ther galoot war not dead onter yer crooks, Jake, but I'll bet forty dollars he is now. He made his leetle bluff, you jumped at et an' putt up ther game, an' he nabbed two ov ther gang—fer what? Why, ter squeeze 'em till they'd squeal, ov course!"

"Perhaps," Red Panther admitted, grimly. "If so, he got the wrong men. Rocky Randall and Flush Frank will go to their graves with sealed lips."

"We can't tell about that," Sleek Sid remarked, reflectively. "But it's of no use to lament over spilled milk."

"The question is, what are we going to do?"

"We've got to strike a sharp, quick blow, or

lose the mines and our chance at the buried treasure, and end up with our necks in a halter, to boot.

"Frank got onto it that there was trouble brewing, warned us, and went to Rapid City to warn you, and Mose and I went down and notified the Regulators to clear out of the vicinity, under pain of being driven off. But the cusses laughed at us, and simply shifted their camp a mile nearer the Gulch."

"You can leave the Regulators to me," Red Panther observed. "My men will be here shortly after noon, and I shall proceed at once against the gang."

"The main point is to secure Gold-Dust Dan."

"As for Reckless Roy and the Bradlaw girl, they are here in the hotel, if I understand the matter right, where we can put our hands on them just when we want them."

"Edzactly!" cried the marshal. "An' I moves, pards, thet ye snake thet young varmint an' his pard out ov this hotel in thet mornin', give 'em a trial an' then h'ist 'em by the neck fer bein' road-agents an' outlaws."

The mayor and Red Panther nodded approval.

"And the girl?" queried Sleek Sid.

"Keep her in the hotel till ter-morrow night, then run her off inter the Hills. Most likely she's got the casket we've bin wantin'."

"Correct you are!" quoth the mayor, approvingly. "To-morrow will be a fine day for a lynching-bee. The camp will likely be packed, as it is the day for Professor Flyer's balloon ascension, and that event has been widely advertised. It will be no trouble at all to shuffle them off, if we only have a few good witnesses."

"Trust me ter find them," chuckled Weeping Mose, carefully wiping his eyes. "I'll go out an' hustle 'em up, by an' by."

Jubilant at the prospect of success, the nefarious trio took a couple of drinks around, and then Weeping Mose departed to "fix" the witnesses, while Red Panther called Landlord Jerry into the room to arrange for the capture of Reckless Roy and Idaho.

That done, the renegade rose, drew his poncho about him and quitted the hotel. Securing his horse, he mounted and rode east nearly a mile, where he went into camp in a secluded little dell to await the appearance of his band.

An hour after the departure of Red Panther, the marshal rejoined the mayor, with the announcement that he had procured and coached the necessary witnesses. Then, just as day began to show in the east, the two wretches sallied forth to set their nefarious schemes afoot.

Their first move was to arouse the three men constituting the town council. This body, let it be known, was as plastic as wax in the hands of the mayor and the marshal, and now readily fell in with their scheme, without knowing the depth of villainy underlying it.

After a brief consultation, the five proceeded to get out a half-dozen miners, and then the crowd started for the hotel, with Sleek Sid and Weeping Mose the lead.

Landlord Jerry was just opening up the bar-room, and met the posse with a wondering stare. The rascal was well up in the part he was to play.

Sleek Sid briefly explained their mission. The landlord pleaded ignorance as to the character of the two men, and vigorously protested his innocence of any desire to harbor outlaws. Inviting the crowd up to the bar, he set out the liquor, then closed and locked the door and announced his readiness to conduct them to the quarters of Reckless Roy.

No time was lost. With stealthy tread the twelve men ascended the stairs and tried the door of the young outlaw's room. It was locked on the inside.

"Stand ready, pards!" uttered Weeping Mose in a hoarse whisper. "Hyar she goes!"

With the words the burly rough hurled himself forward with a force that shook the building and sent the door crashing inward, torn from its hinges.

Uttering a triumphant yell, the mob surged into the room.

Idaho, awakened from a light slumber by the uproar, sprung to his feet, revolver in hand. A single startled glance, then he retreated a pace, leveled the weapon and fired.

The ball sped true. With a convulsive bound Weeping Mose dropped to the floor, dead.

At the same instant, Reckless Roy sprang half-dressed from his cot and seized his weapons; but before either man could fire a second shot, the posse was upon them, and in less than the time it takes to tell it, both were bound and helpless.

"Aha! my fine fellows, you are caged at last!" cried Sleek Sid, his pale-gray eyes glow-

ing with devilish satisfaction. "And, my word for it! you shall swing for this hour's work!"

"Away with them, boys! Take them to the lock-up, and inform Ish Wade that I shall hold him responsible for their safe-keeping. Before the sun sets again they shall be tried and punished!"

In grim silence the prisoners were hurried away, followed by four men bearing the corpse of Weeping Mose.

"Now to secure the girl," the mayor exclaimed, turning to Landlord Jerry as soon as they were alone. "Lead on, for we must get this business over."

"Ther sooner ther better," the Boniface responded, and he led the way to Media Bradlaw's apartment.

A vigorous knocking elicited no response. Uttering an oath, Sleek Sid tried the door and found it unlocked.

"Aha! that is strange!" he ejaculated. "Can she have fled?"

"We kin see," the landlord replied, with a startled air, and pushing the door open he strode into the room.

It was empty!

The two rascals stared at each other in mute astonishment.

"Gone, by thunder!" ejaculated Landlord Jerry, after a moment, and then a torrent of profanity burst from his lips.

A thorough search, first of the apartment, then of the entire building, failed to discover so much as a clew to the missing girl's whereabouts, and the two men were forced to the conclusion that she had slipped out of the hotel and fled into the hills.

Roundly cursing his ill-luck, Sleek Sid hurried out, and within a half-hour had three of the best trailers in the Gulch quietly hunting the trail.

That done, the mayor turned his attention to another matter—the trial of Reckless Roy and Idaho.

As the forenoon wore away, the men from the surrounding hills came in to witness the balloon ascension, and by eleven o'clock there were nearly two hundred men in Gold Gulch.

Of this number, when noon came, but a small group were clustered around the balloon, which was being inflated, while for perhaps fifty others the lock-up was the center of attraction.

The saloons and gambling-dens were doing a thriving business, for there were most of the miners to be found; and between these alluring resorts and the coming trial, Professor Flyer, the aeronaut, was in a cold sweat, as his chances for a paying collection looked poor.

Just at noon, forth from the lock-up came the mayor, followed by the three members of the council, and the two prisoners under heavy guard, and the court was formed and the trial opened, with the mayor presiding.

Then the saloons and gambling-dens gave up their inmates, and as the balloonist saw the throng gathering around the doomed outlaws, he took heart and grimly waited. His chance at the crowd would surely come next!

For over an hour the trial dragged on, and in the opinion of the miners the accused was given "the biggest kind of a chance;" but the evidence of outlawry was strongly against them, and then in resisting arrest they had killed Weeping Mose, the marshal, so that hanging was a foregone conclusion.

The judge delivered his charge to the jury, and after half an hour of grave deliberation, the twelve men returned a verdict of guilty against both men.

Then came the sentence, and preparations were made for an immediate execution. One member of the council hurried away and brought up a horse, another a rope, and Idaho was placed in the saddle, with his hands pinioned at his back.

Down near the swaying balloon stood a lone oak, and thither the crowd surged, following the doomed outlaw. The rope was deftly thrown over a strong limb fifteen feet above ground, and as the end descended it was grasped by eager hands and a noose hastily formed.

Idaho, erect and defiant, with a set, resolute face, watched the hands upon the reins with unfaltering eyes. Hope was tugging fiercely at the outlaw's heart, for by some strange chance the horse singled out for the execution was his own.

And the moment he watched for came. The completed noose was flung forward, and hands left the reins to grasp it and place it around the outlaw's neck.

Unwitting move! A sharp thrust of his spurs, a wild yell, and Idaho, bending low in the saddle, swept forward with the speed of a thunder-

bolt, the powerful roan horse hurling men right and left from his path!

A moment of stupefied inaction, then up from the crowd rose a mighty roar, followed by the sharp rattle of revolvers. The daring outlaw reeled in his saddle, then recovered, just as his horse plunged out of sight around an angle in the trail!

A pursuing party was hastily organized, with the mayor in the lead; but after two miles of furious riding without catching so much as a glimpse of the fugitive, the chase was abandoned and all returned to the Gulch.

The crowd was clamoring savagely for the life of Reckless Roy. Naught but the determined front of the strong guard holding him in charge had prevented his being lynched during the absence of the mayor.

Enraged at his combined ill-luck, Slick Sid at once gave the order, and the outlaw leader was hurried forward and thrown upon a horse.

The noose escaped by the daring Idaho hung in waiting for a victim, and in another minute it settled firmly around the neck of Reckless Roy.

But, a moment before, unnoticed by the excited throng, a man mounted upon a matchless black horse had ridden into Gold Gulch, sweeping along with the speed of the wind, and now plunged straight through the crowd, to draw rein abruptly beneath the tree.

A knife glittered in his hand, and with a single swift stroke he severed the tightening rope.

Then, as a roar of rage went up from the baffled roughs, he dropped the blade, drew and leveled his revolvers.

"Where is the mayor of this camp?" he sternly demanded, his dark eyes fearlessly meeting the sea of angry faces around him.

"I am the man!" Sleek Sid enunciated, in a voice hoarse with fury, as he leaped forward with weapons in hand. "And curse you! I'd know why you interfere in the execution of this outlaw!"

"Because it is my duty to do so," was the measured response. "Roy St. Clair, or Reckless Roy as you know him, is no longer an outlaw!"

"In my pocket I hold for him, not only a full and unconditional pardon, but also his commission as a United States Marshal!"

"Stand back, for he goes from here a free man!"

"He is guilty of the murder of Weeping Mose, and I say he shall hang for it!" cried Sleek Sid, and an approving yell went up from the crowd.

"And I say he shall not!" sternly retorted the youth, a look of dire ire flashing from his dark eyes, and he quickly covered the mayor.

"And Red Panther ordered him hanged!"

"Hands up, Gold-Dust Dan!" uttered a powerful voice, and forth from the cover of a large building hard by spurred the notorious renegade, closely followed by a full score armed men!

A hush like that of death came over the turbulent throng.

CHAPTER XII.

ROVING RUTH'S REVELATION.

WHAT had befallen Media Bradlaw?

Up with the first gleam of day from a sound, refreshing sleep, she had quietly dressed herself and put her room in order, then buckled on her belt of arms and donned her hat in readiness for an early morning walk.

Assuring herself that the casket was yet safe in her pocket, she opened the door and stepped out into the hall, just as the posse under the lead of Landlord Jerry appeared at the bottom of the stairway.

Something in the appearance of that body of armed men struck a chill of terror to the heart of the girl, and unobserved she retreated into her room and softly closed the door.

A moment of suspense, then came the crash of assault and the report of Idaho's revolver, and Media felt that her worst fears were confirmed.

A glance into the upper hall showed that it was deserted, and catching up her rifle the girl cautiously quitted the room and glided toward the stairway, and thence undetected descended to the lower floor.

The key was in the lock of the door opening upon the street, and in another minute Media was in the open air.

Hardly pausing to choose her course, the girl darted away through the winding street, flitting along like a shadow in the light of the early dawn. On the outskirts of the camp she paused a moment to look back, then hurried on over the rough trail at a rapid walk.

And now that she was safely clear of the camp, her courage returned, she became cool and col-

lected, and the full peril of her situation dawned upon her.

Alone and afoot in the Black Hills—in a region overrun by hostile red-skins and lawless white men! The situation was indeed grave, and as the bitter black truth forced itself upon her, Media paused, and for a brief space seemed half-determined to return to the Gulch.

"The perils ahead can be no greater than the danger in Gold Gulch," she decided, after a moment, with a firm compression of her red lips. "The worst of it all is, I am afoot. Had I Hurricane, I should have no fears. But if it comes to the worst, I have my weapons, and shall use them."

So, with a resolute face she resumed her flight, and for over an hour pushed on at a rapid walk. Then, on the crest of a rise she turned and looked back.

A startled cry escaped her.

A half-mile below, coming up the trail at a steady, easy run, were three men—the trailers sent out by Sleek Sid. As Media halted, the trio hastily sought cover in the undergrowth and behind the numerous boulders scattered along the wayside.

"It is as I feared!" the girl cried, and a hunted look came into her blue eyes. "Now, what shall I do?"

Even as that question presented itself, Media turned and walked slowly on, wisely checking an impulse to run until the crest of the hill veiled her movements from the trio of trailers.

Then down the sharp slope with the speed of a deer she darted, at the foot instinctively turning from the trail into a winding gorge, adown which tumbled a noisy, brawling stream.

On and on she sped, until a break in the south wall of the gorge opened to view a beautiful "pocket"—a grassy glade dotted with flowers and hemmed in with broken, craggy walls so densely covered with vines as to resemble huge banks of foliage.

And near the center of this pocket was a lone grave, above which a heavy white cross reared its head, for here it was that Gold-Dust Dan had come at Old Calamity's request the night before.

The glade invited entrance, for the masses of vines suggested concealment, and with a single backward glance, Media nimbly sprang from stone to stone across the shallow stream and hurried over the grassy level.

Beside that lone grave she hesitated, then paused. The flowers blooming upon the narrow mound, and its neat, well-kept appearance, betrayed the care of a loving hand. Media raised her eyes to the inscription painted on the cross.

Her face grew ghastly white.

"It is Jack! It is my brother!" she moaned, and with a low, wailing cry, she reeled forward and fell senseless across the mound.

"Thar's ther critter, shure enough, pard!—'cross thar in Dead Man's Pocket! An' f'm ther looks ov things, I reckon et won't be any great shakes ter kaptivate her, uther! Come on, an' we'll finish up a mighty good day's work."

And one after another Sleek Sid's trailers leaped across the little stream and hurried toward the lone grave, eager to capture Media Bradlaw and claim the reward named by the Mayor of Gold Gulch that morning.

The hapless girl lay just as she had fallen, looking more dead than alive, her face gleaming cold and white in the rays of the morning sun.

"She is swooned, by thunder!" exclaimed the foremost of the trio of roughs, peering sharply at that set, white face.

"Bring up some water, Benjy. Et's a good seven miles ter ther lone cabin, an' I've no mind ter tote her thar!"

"Nary a tote, Boss Bill," chuckled the rascal addressed. "But et's a heap sight quicker ter get her down ter ther drink than ter fetch ther drink up ter her. Jest lay a-holt, an' away we go!"

"Halt! don't touch that girl, you miserable scoundrels!"

The words rung out in a voice as clear as the peal of a bugle, and with one accord the trio of trailers sprang to their feet and drew their weapons.

Simultaneously, a cry of alarm broke from the lips of each.

Out from the apparently solid wall back of that mass of swaying vines rode Roving Ruth on her snow-white steed, closely followed by eight cowed black riders.

"Drop your weapons and up with your hands!" sternly ordered the beautiful mystery, as each of her dread riders leveled his rifle.

A howl of terror went up from the three

roughs, for a single backward glance had verified the woman's words. Four black horsemen had appeared at the entrance to the pocket.

"Order your imps not ter shoot, m'am, fer we does cavel!" uttered Boss Bill.

"It is well," Roving Ruth returned, and then at a word from her four of the men rode forward and dismounted, to disarm and bind the roughs, while a fifth lifted Media Bradlaw in his arms and bore her back of that network of vines from behind which the party had so suddenly emerged.

Here was the yawning mouth of a huge cavern, and leaving her faithful followers to secure the entrapped roughs, Roving Ruth dismounted and led the way into a curtained recess of the cave.

There Media was placed upon a couch of skins, and under the kindly care of the beautiful mystery soon returned to consciousness.

"Be not alarmed, for I am a friend," uttered Roving Ruth, as the blue eyes of the girl suddenly opened and fixed upon her face in a wondering stare. "You are Media Bradlaw, and it is your brother who is buried out there. The men who killed him also seek your life, but you are safe here."

"And you—who are you?" Media asked, choking back a sob as she rose to her feet.

The woman laughed oddly, and with her hands pushed back her long white hair.

"I am known as Roving Ruth," she replied. "But you are *his* sister, and should know all."

"Listen: My name is Ruth Gordon. For five years I lived in the hills with my father, who was a hermit miner. Then came John Bradlaw and two friends, and they, too, discovered gold, and for two years secretly worked their mines. John and I met and became engaged, but a week before the day we were to be married, he was slain by Flush Frank, a tool of the Rapid City banker, Jake Rose, who is none other than the renegade chief, Red Panther. On the same day, my father, Kenneth Gordon, was shot down by the same evil band, and I was left utterly alone and helpless. Some say I went mad, and perhaps I did. But I had gold—gold in plenty, and I lived and plotted for vengeance. I have haunted the guilty wretches, sparing nothing to secure the full proofs of their guilt, for I have sworn that every man of them shall hang. With gold I hired good men and true, and now am at last on the eve of complete success."

"This cavern is one of our stopping-places, and here we came last night. I saw you enter the glade, and heard your words upon discovering poor Jack's grave. A lookout reported that you were pursued, and my men laid a trap for the wretches, and they are now in custody."

"Such, in brief, is the outline of our present positions, but I would like, Media Bradlaw, to hear your story. As the sister of my dead lover, you are near and dear to me, and if there is aught I can do for you, it shall be done."

With a look far more eloquent than words, Media expressed her thanks, then sunk down upon the edge of the couch, and in a voice broken and faltering, told her story.

Leaving the two girls thus strangely brought together, we shall now turn to a more stirring scene.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

FOR a full minute after that hoarse command from Red Panther rung out, Gold-Dust Dan neither moved nor uttered a word.

That both himself and Reckless Roy were face to face with death, he could not doubt; yet his iron nerve did not fail him.

"Your demand seems most reasonable, Jacob Rose, but I shall have to refuse to comply with it," he smilingly exclaimed. "Our circumstances are undergoing such a decided change that it would be a waste of time for me to yield."

"May I ask you to take a look at the lower trail?"

Even as the detective spoke, a startling change swept over the renegade chief, and a fierce oath came from between his clinched teeth.

"By Heavens! it is Roving Ruth and her band of Black Bravos!" he ejaculated.

"Exactly!" blandly assented Dan. "And now, my good sir, just glance at the upper trail!"

There, indeed, just entering the camp under the lead of Old Calamity and Big Davy, were the Regulators!

And at the same moment, the bewildered crowd awakened from its stupefied inaction and with a mighty roar surged toward the daring renegade, intent on his capture or death.

"Fall back, boys!" ordered Red Panther

hoarsely. "We've run our necks into a noose, and must trust our heels to escape!"

But even retreat was cut off, for forth from the very covert from which Red Panther and his band had appeared a moment before, now spurred a horseman in the uniform of a captain of the United States Army, closely followed by a strong detachment of cavalry!

"Halt! Throw down your arms and surrender, every man of you!" commanded the cavalry captain, in a ringing voice. "Resist, and we'll cut you down as we would ravening wolves!"

"It's Captain Maxwell's blue-coats—curse them! I thought we'd slipped them hours ago!" gritted one of the renegade clan, spurring alongside his chief ever as his comrades dropped their weapons in token of submission. "Quick, Jake!—we're hemmed in and that balloon is our only chance!"

Though almost speechless with terror, Red Panther was quick to seize upon the faint hope suggested, and with his daring follower sprang from the saddle into the car attached to the swaying, tugging balloon.

A frantic yell from Professor Flyer—a mighty shout from the crowd, and then the balloon shot skyward with the two men, followed by a storm of lead.

A thousand feet straight up, then away to the northwest it swept, in the grasp of a strong current; on and on, till it became a mere speck in the hazy distance.

"Gentlemen, the gas is escaping, and in ten minutes the car will touch the earth!" suddenly cried Professor Flyer, shutting his powerful glass with a snap and turning to the excited crowd. "Who will go with me to recover my property and learn the fate of those two men?"

"Here!" exclaimed Roving Ruth, quitting Media Bradlaw's side and riding forward. "I would know Red Panther's fate!"

"I will send three of my men," Captain Maxwell said. "I, too, must learn the outlaw's end."

"And three of the Regulators shall go," added Reckless Roy, while many of the miners set up a shout and hurried away to secure horses to join in the search.

Ten minutes later a strong party galloped out of the camp by way of the upper trail.

Not until the next day did they return, and then their report was one to send a thrill of relief through every honest man in Gold Gulch.

Red Panther had perished—had been dashed to pieces by the sudden collapse of the balloon.

Of his reckless companion not a trace had been found.

"I am ready to return and make my report," said Captain Maxwell, when his lieutenant had finished. "Our orders were to stick to the trail till we'd captured or wiped out that scourge. He is dead, and his men are captives, so our work is done."

"Reckless Roy, you have my thanks for sending a courier with the timely information leading to this happy result."

Upon her return to Gold Gulch, Roving Ruth at once sought out Media Bradlaw and delivered into her hands the counterpart of the casket held by the girl. It had been found upon the mangled corpse of Red Panther!

In due course, the caskets were opened, and the secret of the buried treasure was solved.

Contrary to all expectation, both Flush Frank and Rocky Randall made full confession when brought to trial, and so Media Bradlaw was enabled to recover her dead brother's property, the Gold Gulch mines.

Both of the desperadoes were hanged.

Diligent search was made for Sleek Sid and Landlord Jerry, but neither was found. Learning that they were likely to be wanted at a rope's end, both had made good their escape.

Her mission in Gold Gulch accomplished, Roving Ruth rode away at the head of the Black Bravos, with the promise to return from time to time.

Reckless Roy and Idaho both recovered from their wounds, and for some time thereafter made Gold Gulch their headquarters, as did Old Calamity, Big Davy and the Regulators.

And Gold-Dust Dan?

His oath to the dying immigrant fulfilled, the young knight-errant was ready for a fresh adventure, and one day mounted his horse, the matchless Prince, and rode away toward Deadwood, to try a joust with a particularly audacious road-agent who had recently made his appearance on the trails entering the Black Hills metropolis.

THE END.

Col. Ingraham's Splendid Wild-Southwest Romance!



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OR,

The Renegades' Captive.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

A BOY HERO.

"HERE'S a letter from Omaha, now, and we will hear all about Charlie, for it is from my brother."

The speaker was a genial-faced man of middle age, and he was seated in a pleasant sitting-room of his own comfortable house in the State of Kentucky.

It was away back among the "Fifties," before the Civil War that shook our land from one end to the other, and when the "Far West" was beyond the now great city of Chicago.

THE DESPERADO THREW HIS LASSO; THE NOOSE SETTLED OVER THE HEAD OF DASHING CHARLIE.

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